

# ANY JEWS LEFT IN Eritrea?

*Although the Eritrean capital of Asmara is less than 1,000 miles from Tel Aviv, this quaint African-Italian city is the last place you might expect to find a Jewish community. However, we discovered a fully equipped, well-cared-for synagogue, a kosher mikveh, and a Jewish cemetery — all testimonies to once-vibrant Jewish life. Who actually lived in Eritrea? How did they get there? And what light can its Jewish connections shed on the Jews of neighboring Ethiopia? **Mishpacha** travels to this African backwater, which in its own way offered shelter, safety, and financial opportunities during a precarious century, when none of that could be taken for granted*



*Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan*

Many people won't be able to tell you where Eritrea is, or even whether it is a city, a country, or a neurological condition. Map-lovers, however, know that Eritrea is a small East African country flanked by Sudan in the west, Ethiopia in the south, and Djibouti in the southeast, and directly across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia and Yemen. As part of our quest to explore remnants of Jewish communities around the globe, we were curious: what Jewish community could have existed in such a remote and isolated location, and what history could we expect to find?

We recently took a trip to the Eritrean capital of Asmara, a city situated on a plateau on the northwestern edge of the Great Rift Valley, to explore the remnants of the Eritrean Jewish community. To the best of our knowledge, during the time we were there, only two other Jews were in the country — the new Israeli consul and his wife. Looks can be deceiving, though, and while the small Jewish community of Asmara was not ancient, it was exceedingly vibrant.

In Asmara, there remains one pious Jew, Mr. Sami Cohen. Now in his early sixties, Cohen fondly remembers the heyday of Asmara Jewry and ensures the upkeep of the synagogue so that any traveler can walk in any day of the year and daven. And indeed, we did just that one day this past summer.

We arrived in Asmara late one night after an entire day flying. Although Asmara is less than 1,000 miles from Tel Aviv, there are very few flights to this poor, backward country. One can reach Asmara only by flying through Cairo, Sana'a, or Jeddah; thus we were required to fly via Frankfurt and Jeddah, in a seventeen-hour trip. Locals later told us that Air Eritrea, currently nonoperational, will be back up and running once its two planes are repaired. After arriving in what can only be described as the lowest-tech international airport in the world and sleeping in this quaint African-Italian city, we found ourselves the following morning in a fully equipped shul, lacking only a minyan. It was clean, well-lit, stocked with siddurim and other required books, plus two *sifrei Torah*, all being taken care of by Sami.

We had met with Sami in Israel prior to our sojourn, and while Sami was actually not in Eritrea when we visited, we felt his presence, whether it was by gaining access to the shul, by obtaining kosher food, or by arranging housing details. He cares for the shul as if it were his own home. The non-Jewish woman he employs to clean and care for the building has been dedicated to her job for over forty-five years.

"I remember what this community was like when I was child," says Sami. "We had schools and social programs and lectures. It was vibrant and beautiful." Everyone we spoke with — from the lady in the printing shop to a young man in the Internet cafe — seems to know and respect Sami. He is Eritrea's Jewish icon.

What kind of Jewish community existed in this obscure African country? Among the earliest Jewish inhabitants of Asmara — a city

Photo: Reuter





Photo: Reuters

Following the European colonization of most of Africa in the nineteenth century, Adenite Jews sensed opportunities and began doing business along the eastern African coast, moving their families along with them. This was the beginning of the Asmara *kehillah*

7,000 feet above sea level with an inviting climate — were the Behar brothers, Uriel and Nissim, who came from Istanbul in 1890. They started a business that grew to become one of Eritrea’s largest export firms. As the Jewish community grew, they realized there was a need for a shul, and in 1906 Uriel, who was the first president of the community, received a plot of land for a synagogue from the ruling Italian colonial authorities. Because the land was to be used for religious purposes, it was given free of charge. Construction began immediately. About a third of the allocated land was used for the shul, with the rest being used for the school, offices, *mikveh*, and yard. As Sami says: “There was a Jewish school in the compound of the synagogue. We were fortunate to have a teacher who gave us lessons in the afternoons and on holidays, and taught students of all ages.”

Recently a one-hundredth anniversary event was held for the shul, for which many former members returned.

**From Across the Sea** Most of the Jews in Asmara were not from Istanbul, but rather from the southern Yemeni port city of Aden, about which we’ll learn more below. Eritrea was not alone in having a Diaspora Adenite community. The entire eastern coast of Africa had a little-known chain of Jewish communities that began in the late nineteenth century and peaked in the mid-twentieth century. Starting from the north and proceeding toward the south, there were Adenite communities in Asmara and Massawa, Eritrea; Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, Ethiopia; Djibouti; Mogadishu, Somalia; and Nairobi, Kenya. These communities were predominantly made up of Yemenite Jews who came to Africa, starting in the late 1800s, to seek their fortunes, and who were later joined by Sephardic Jews and still later by Ashkenazim escaping from Europe.

When we traveled to Ethiopia in the 1980s to offer assistance to the Beta Yisrael, known then by the pejorative term “Falasha,” we were pleasantly surprised to discover that there existed in Addis Ababa a separate Adenite community complete with their own shul, a minyan, and kosher food. In fact, on one of our trips, we were able to *shecht* chickens for some of the people as there was no *shochet* there at that time. Back then we had also learned about the Eritrean community, but due to the war raging then between Ethiopia and Eritrea, we were strongly discouraged from visiting Eritrea.

The memory of those meetings stayed with us over the last twenty years, and when Ari Greenspan was in Ethiopia for Yom Kippur two years ago, he discovered that a shul still existed in neighboring Asmara, Eritrea; and so, never wanting to pass up a halachic-historical adventure, we decided to go and explore the roots and remnants of that congregation.

The Jewish community of Eritrea actually had its roots in the Jews of Aden, a strategic southern Yemenite port city that controlled access to the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean. Jews have probably lived in Aden for over 2,000 years. In 1839, the British Empire, seeking to protect its trade routes to the Far East, conquered this little town of 600 occupants and the surrounding seventy-five square miles. For the first time since the Muslim conquest, Jews living on the Arabian Peninsula were given equal rights.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Jews of Aden were a cosmopolitan, educated group, much more sophisticated than their simpler northern Yemenite Jewish brethren. Jews from Iraq, India, and even Europe joined the existing community. A number of *meshulachim* from Israel even visited there in the mid-1800s. At its peak, the community numbered over 8,000 Jews. While sitting in shul in Addis Ababa on Yom Kippur in 2007, Mr. Felix, a Yemenite



Despite a land feud, the cemetery has remained under Jewish protection

native, was telling Ari Greenspan about the 2,000-year-old cemetery in Aden. “I was born in Aden and my parents came here when I was a little boy almost seventy years ago. See my eyes? They are blue and my skin is not dark. My family was descended from Spanish exiles and not Yemenites.” While they were initially disadvantaged like their poorer northern cousins, both economically and socially, they soon developed business acumen and edged their way into a new world. The confluence of Yemenite religious piety and Torah study, together with European cosmopolitanism, created a unique community and culture.

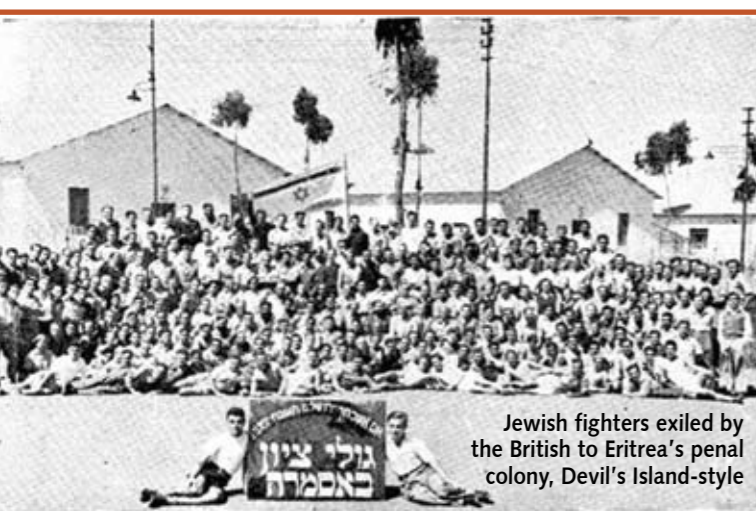
Following the European colonization of most of Africa in the nineteenth century, Adenite Jews sensed opportunities and began doing business along the eastern African coast, moving their families along with them. This was the beginning of the Asmara community. Sami Cohen’s family lived in Aden for many generations, until his grandparents moved to the Eritrean port of Massawa at the turn of the twentieth century. Following an earthquake in 1921, they migrated to Asmara, where they lived for many years. Now the family has dispersed to Israel, England (Sami has a British passport), and Italy, where Sami’s immediate family resides.

The Jewish community was made up primarily of Adenites, along with some Jews from Istanbul. The Yemenites, however, were the ones who were soon brought in as teachers, *mohelim*, and *shochtim*. There were a fair number of Italian Jews; and in the late 1930s, some European Jews escaping from the Germans made their way there as well.

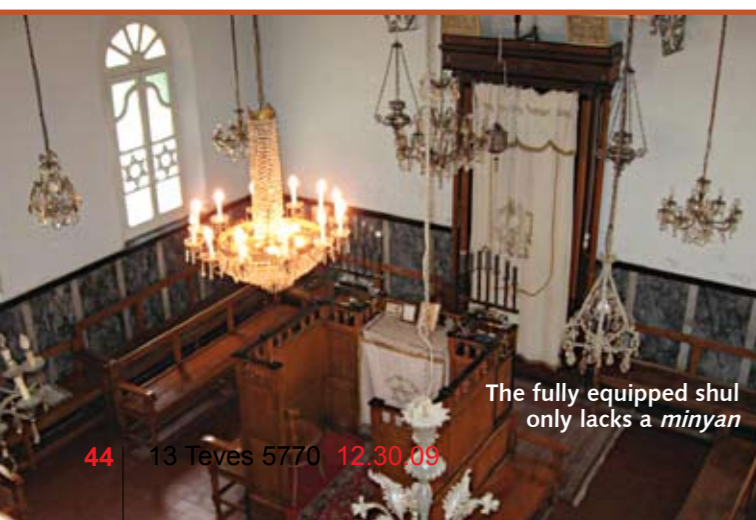
Asmara had been a small village for much of history, until the 1870s, when, under Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia, it began to develop into a regional capital for commerce. In 1830, Asmara had a population of 150; by the 1880s, it had risen to 2,000. The area was colonized by Italy in the 1880s, and in 1936 Eritrea became a province of Italian East Africa. The British defeated and expelled the Italians in 1941, and administered the country until 1951, when it became part of Ethiopia. Eritrea is strategically important due to its mineral resources and its Red Sea coastline, which was Ethiopia’s only sea access.

Still, Asmara feels Italian. Half the 1930s population of 100,000 was Italian; a good deal of the city was built in the late 1930s to further Mussolini’s plans for a second Roman Empire in Africa.

A short walk around the center of town reveals the Italian flavor of the city and the ghosts of the Jewish community. The wealthy Adenite businessman Banin built the main shul, which celebrated its one-hundredth birthday in 2005. The synagogue is a beautiful



Jewish fighters exiled by the British to Eritrea’s penal colony, Devil’s Island-style



The fully equipped shul only lacks a *minyan*



The British may have succeeded in isolating the prisoners from their Israeli comrades, but they didn't take into account the local Jewish support. The Jews of Asmara, Addis Ababa, and Djibouti helped the escapees by providing food and shelter



The doorpost is a witness to once-thriving Jewish life



After years of disuse, the mikveh still functions



The synagogue compound. "We had schools and social programs," Sami remembers



Matzoh oven in the Cohen courtyard: Today it all comes from Israel

building with a typical Sephardic sanctuary and a small balcony for the women's gallery. The *aron kodesh* still holds two *sifrei Torah* in their traditionally Sephardic wooden cases, which are occasionally used. For example, a minyan happened to be present on Shabbos Zachor two years ago, and read from both Torahs. In many North African shuls, *tzedakah* boxes are built into the side of the *bimah*, designated for various communal needs. Asmara is no exception, and the various slots are still labeled: the poor of Asmara, the poor of Jerusalem, Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes, and, so as not to forget the folks back in the *alter heim*, "the poor of Aden."

The *mikveh* in the shul compound still has water in it, although it is not very clean and it has probably not been used in years. This *mikveh* has two side-by-side pits, an *otzar* for the rainwater and an immersion basin where the person *toivels*.

The local Jewish school, where all community members sent their children, had several rooms in the shul compound — sharing space with chickens that would be slaughtered in the compound. Larger animals were handled in a slaughterhouse around the corner.

A large house that was built by the prominent Banin-Mansour family and owned by Shoa Menachem Joseph, president of the community from 1916 until his death in 1965, is currently the Pension Milano hotel. Sami advised us to visit the building and see the many obvious indications of its history as a former Jewish residence; artistically designed plaster Magen Davids in the ceilings, and stained-glass Magen Davids on the windows. From our perspective, the most significant testimony of a Jewish presence was the doorways, where the mezuzah marks and nail-holes are still clearly evident. We could not help but wonder: What happy events had occurred within these walls? What songs had echoed in the hallways when the *zemiros* were sung and the Torah learned? What community meetings were held in this house, and what decisions were made that affected the lives of its members?

We have done much research in the history of matzoh preparation in communities around the world, so we were curious about Eritrea as well. As with most small communities today, for the last several decades all matzos have been imported. Sami Cohen, however, still has a matzoh oven in his backyard. "I remember when my mother would bake matzos here, but since the 1950s we have imported them from Israel. In recent years it's been used for baking challah."

**Prison for Jews** It's always fascinating, but never really surprising, to find an Israeli connection even in the remotest places, and Asmara is no exception. After the British pushed out the Italians in 1941, they found Asmara useful in another way. At the height of anti-British Irgun activity in Palestine, the British were becoming increasingly frustrated in their attempts to guard difficult prisoners on Israeli soil. The British decided to utilize Asmara as a penal colony, following the models of the nineteenth-century British prisons in the Australian wilds, and

France's notorious Devil's Island in French Guiana.

In the dead of night in October 1944, in a swift, surprise move known as Operation Snowball, 251 of the toughest Irgun and Lechi fighters were taken from Latrun Prison and whisked away by plane to Asmara. In those days, with limited air travel, the town was truly isolated, much like today's American camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The "Jewish terrorists," of whom the British were terrified, were taken without notice and sent to desolate Africa to be held without a trial or time limit in Sambal Prison in Eritrea; to Carthage, Sudan; and to Gilgil, Kenya. Later other prisoners were added to the original group, bringing the total to over 400.

During the twenty months that the Eritrean camp was in existence, a dozen prison breaks occurred. Among those shipped to Sambal Prison in Eritrea was former Prime Minister Yitzchak Shamir, the commander of the Lechi. Shamir left behind his wife and one-year-old son, whom he didn't see again until 1948, following a dangerous and successful escape. The powerful and compelling story of these men is recounted in the book, *Long is the Road to Freedom*, by another former prisoner, Yaakov Meridor, Menachem Begin's number-two man.

The British may have succeeded in isolating the prisoners from their Israeli comrades, but they didn't take into account the local Jewish support. The Jews of Asmara, Addis Ababa, and Djibouti helped the escapees by providing food and shelter. The building in which they were incarcerated is still used as a jail, and thus we were only able to see it from a distance. In the 1950s, when the State of Israel was trying to cope with waves of immigrants and food was scarce, Yaacov Meridor opened a kosher meat-canning factory in Asmara, and *shochtim* from Israel worked there, providing meat for the young country and its army.

**Cemeteries Tell the Story** Adjacent to what must be one of the smallest public zoos in the world, containing nothing more than a few birds, guinea pigs, and — the big attraction — hyenas, we saw the well-manicured British cemetery from World War II. The cemetery contains seven Jewish graves, soldiers who fought with the British against the Italians.

As in all Jewish communities, the Eritrean Jewish cemetery tells its own story. This cemetery is a separate section of the larger Asmara Christian Cemetery; it was given to the community when it started over a century ago. In 1951 the municipality wanted to relocate the graves and use the land for immoral purposes. Wealthy community president Shoa Menachem Joseph purchased the land on behalf of the Jews and to this day it remains in Jewish hands. The non-Jewish caretaker of the entire cemetery also looks after the Jewish section.

On January 17, 1946, Sudanese guards in Sambal Prison killed two Israeli prisoners, who had broken down a gate in





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order to rush another Jewish prisoner, who had been shot, to the hospital. The British refused to transfer the bodies for burial in Israel, and so they were buried in the Jewish section of the Asmara cemetery; they were later reinterred in Israel after the establishment of the State. In recent years, as the community has dwindled, some relatives have transferred the bodies of their loved-ones for reburial in Israel.

When we visited, the caretaker directed us to the Jewish section and we were permitted to roam on our own. We noticed

**Dr Ari Greenspan looks for Jewish life among the Eritrean natives**

the earliest graves dated from the beginning of the twentieth century; the most recent burial seems to have been in 1990. There is one section of small graves belonging to children, from an era not so long ago when childhood diseases claimed many lives.

**Disappearing Act** In addition to Sami Cohen's business, several other Jewish-owned businesses still exist. One of them is owned by Mr. Kanzen, an Adenite Jew who is more often found at his Addis Ababa office than in his hometown. He graciously gave us use of his house and instructed his manager, Mr. Fcadu, to show us the city and share of his knowledge.

How could such a vibrant community, with its own school, *mikveh*, shul, *shochtim*, *mohelim*, and *rabbanim* — a total of over 500 people at its peak in the 1950s — suddenly disappear? And indeed it has disappeared: the last wedding was thirty-five years ago, the last rabbi left in 1975, and the last funeral was

over ten years ago.

Were the Jews chased out? Not at all. Although Judaism is not a religion officially recognized by the Eritrean government, there is no history of Jewish persecution. We did not sense any animosity directed toward us as Jews or as Israelis. In fact, today Israel and Eritrea have full diplomatic relations, with an Eritrean embassy in Tel Aviv and an Israeli embassy in Asmara.

We met the Eritrean ambassador in Israel as part of the visa process and he had only positive things to say about Israel. Regarding Eritrea he said: "Our country is developing and we have excellent relations with Israel." He volunteered to us that some things his government does may seem a bit harsh, but in typical communist double talk he told us, "We know what is best for our own people."

While in Asmara we visited the Israel embassy, not an easy task due to the multilayered security, and later had dinner with

the new counsel and his wife, who had been in the country for all of two weeks. They seem like a capable young pair in an isolated assignment. How isolated? It is the only posting to which the Israeli Foreign Service is willing to ship food.

So what caused the exodus of the Jews? Some left for Israel when the Jewish state achieved independence. For most, though, it was the turbulence of the region, and not personal choice, that was the main factor in emigration. In 1961, the bitter civil war with Ethiopia — the Eritrean War of Independence — began after Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia. It was then that Jews began to leave.

Jewish emigration increased in the 1970s following an ongoing series of battles that reached all the way to Asmara. Emigration peaked in 1975, when many Europeans fled due to the revolution, which resulted in nationalization of private factories and property. The fighting, coupled with dictatorships and rigid communism, were the proximal causes of the dwindling of the community. Even Sami Cohen's family had had enough, and in 1998 they moved to Italy.

Visiting a community like this is bittersweet. On the one hand it is sad to see such a rich history and yet an empty shul. What little there is today is unlikely to remain in a decade or two. However, Eritrea served its historical purpose for its Jewish residents, offering shelter, safety, and financial opportunities during a precarious century, when none of that could be taken for granted. ■

*Dr. Ari Greenspan is a dentist in Jerusalem, as well as a mohel, sofer, and shochet. Rabbi Dr. Ari Zivotofsky is a professor of brain sciences in Bar Ilan University and a shochet and mohel. The two have been chavrusos for twenty five years and travel on halachic adventures around the globe to discover and record Jewish traditions.*