

THE JEWS OF DJERBA

On a picturesque Mediterranean island off the coast of Tunisia, a Jewish community that dates to the time of the first Beis HaMikdash preserves the traditions of its ancestors. Education, marriage, and kashrus customs remain virtually unchanged from centuries gone by in one of the last Jewish communities in the Arab world

by Ari Greenspan

It almost doesn't sound real: a tropical island, far away from everywhere, palm trees swaying in the warm salty breeze ... and one of the most pristine Jewish communities in the world.

Djerba, a small island off the coast of Tunisia, boasts a beautiful ancient shul, called "el-Ghriba," or "the large one" in Arabic, which is one of about fifteen synagogues on the island that has a flourishing religious community of 1,000 souls. The current structure was built in 1929, but the site has continually had a shul on it for over 1,900 years.

El-Ghriba is also the central meeting point for what could be the last enclave of Judaism in the world where Jewish practice, clothing, language, and devotion remains as it has since the community was founded more than 2,000 years ago.

My trip to Djerba was precipitated by research for a book about the history of matzoh. Flying to an Arab country is not a simple thing, and once I arrived in Tunisia with my traveling companion Dr. Ethan Schuman, things didn't get any easier. Security is a major issue throughout the country, and indeed, as we made our way on foot into the Jewish neighborhood at



A curious mix of old and new: modern banners welcoming visitors to the Lag B'Omer festivities in Djerba's ancient Jewish community

night, two policemen stopped us as potential terrorists.

The streets of Djerba are a sight out of a time gone by. Many streets are little more than dirt paths, and there are virtually no street lights. But little Jewish boys with *peyos* and *yarmulkes*, some in the middle of their soccer game, barely notice the Arab men in the alley.

Tradition and Torah Any discussion of Djerban Jews has to begin with the community's strong attachment to tradition. As opposed to many Western Jewish communities that eagerly shook off the yoke of Torah as soon as they left the shtetls of Eastern Europe, in Djerba tradition is not seen as a burden. Far from it: in the 1930s, when the Jewish French organization Alliance Israel offered to build a school for Jewish and secular education, community elders refused the offer, even offering to pay the Alliance *not* to build it in order to not expose the kids to the outside world.

More recently, however, the community has been more receptive to accepting foreign help; education, too, is a point of pride for locals. Most boys learn in the Djerba Yeshivah, reported to be centuries old; girls and boys who want a secular education attend Torah v'Hinuch, a Mizrahi-type school that offers limited secular education. Being there a week before Pesach, we stopped in a classroom at the yeshivah to see the old teacher, called Ovadia, reading the Haggadah and translating the Hebrew into Arabic so the little kids would know what they were reading. We couldn't help but smile as the children giggled when we came in, as kids are prone to do, but Western notions of corporal punishment haven't infiltrated the island; teachers, and presumably parents, believe there is nothing like a good whack on the knuckles to bring a wayward student into line, and the smallest bit of mischief is met with the stick.

Classes at both schools are conducted in Hebrew, and both schools receive funding from the American Joint Distribution Committee. According to Avi Feiffer, a financial controller for the Joint responsible for Africa and Asia, the educational system in Djerba is a reflection of overall community values.

"The school day is long, with boys studying Torah subjects for six or seven hours a day, in addition to at least two to three hours of secular studies," he told **Mishpacha**. "School is conducted in Hebrew, and one of the schools has a state-of-the-art computer center."

Feiffer said all children in the community (more than 200 at present) attend Jewish schools — a statistic that cannot be matched



Outside the matzoh bakery: Ari Greenspan and Joel Guberman with a newly-found Djerban friend



Under lock and key: the storerooms for flour and wine, marked in Hebrew letters



Rav Biton, the community *posek/shochet/mohel* and general-affairs expert, engrossed in a *sefer*



A strong sense of Jewish identity and pride for tradition: typical street scene

in the Western world. "Even in Jewish communities where Jewish identity and Jewish education opportunities are strong, 100 percent attendance is unheard of. Even in Melbourne, Australia, where Jewish schools run the gamut from ultra-secular to chareidi and where a majority of Jewish families send their children to Jewish schools, a significant percentage of the community does not. This is mainly due to the high cost of tuition.

"Now take Djerba. The community is small enough that the schools can be maintained largely through foreign donations — at the end of the day there are fewer than 500 students — but I think you'd still have to say that community-wide attendance is pretty impressive," said Feiffer.

And at the end of the day, Feiffer adds, the education works. "There is no intermarriage, and no such thing as a 'non-*frum*' Jew in Djerba," he told **Mishpacha**.

The last point is most evident in the Jewish section of the local souk (shuk), where one can still hear shopkeepers arguing about the halachic intricacies of a Gemara discussion, and the owner of the silver shop just across the way is a *chacham*, available to answer questions and resolve textual or halachic difficulties when they inevitably arise. To the Western visitor, the scene is an example of disconnect: a huge Arab souk, filled with handmade Seder trays and

Kiddush cups, with lively Torah discussion filling the air.

Teenagers are expected to enter the work force, and on the day we visited, a fifteen-year-old boy beamed with pride as he opened a tiny stall in the market to sell little silver trinkets. Others maintain jewelry factories, and as the sun begins to set, the Jewish part of the souk is abandoned as the men flock to the 200-year-old shul in the center of the market for Minchah, a short *shiuir* (given in French and Arabic), and Maariv.

Tzniyus: Tradition and Sanctity

The community is very traditional and conservative in everything they do. As in the Western *frum* world, Djerban marriages are half-arranged. *Shidduchim* are arranged when a potential *chassan*, usually eighteen years old, asks his mother to speak to the mother of a sixteen-year-old prospective *kallah* to inquire about a match. If the mothers agree, the couple is granted the opportunity to meet briefly, and for the parents to formally "meet."

This fact was accentuated one Shabbos, when the engaged daughter of a community leader explained to us over dinner that while walking past her husband-to-be on the street without exchanging a word is difficult, there is a strong sense of pride in maintaining community tradition.

The process is reminiscent of the *gemara* in *Kesubos* that describes a time when families divided the celebrations of *erusin* (engagement) and *nisuin* (marriage). The *gemara* gives a *chassan* one year after *erusin* to arrange his finances and to complete the *nisuin*, and while in Djerba this split is not formally recognized in halachic terms, a wedding date can only be set when the *chassan* opens his own shop, showing he will be able to provide for his new wife.

Despite the traditional aspects of life in Djerba, the island has not entirely escaped the modern world, and many young people find themselves torn between tradition and modernity. For instance, one young man, due to be married on Lag B'Omer, after a year's delay following the death of the bride's grandmother last Pesach, said he did not speak to his wife-to-be during the entire delay period, but as he finished speaking, he received an SMS and politely excused himself for the bathroom, to the laughs of his friends.

The joke was quickly explained: The *kallah* had sent him a text message and he was off for a quick cellphone talk. But the kids stressed that despite the fact that some of the young people are totally modern, they maintain a healthy respect for traditional norms and behaviors. And the scene — a group of polished twenty-somethings sitting

in a Muslim-owned coffee shop, wearing yarmulkes, speaking Hebrew, and smoking a nargileh — was as natural as if it had been in Jerusalem.

A Mysterious History The history of the Jewish community is shrouded in mystery, leaving locals and visitors alike to piece together Djerban Jewish history from a series of legends and tales. According to one legend, Jews fleeing the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE made their way across northern Africa carrying a door from the Beis HaMikdash and a stone from the Holy Altar (Mizbeiyach); today, Jewish and Muslim lore attributes the foundation stone of the above-mentioned el-Ghriba shul to that stone. Other Jews on the island arrived following the expulsion from Spain in 1492.

According to tradition, there are no Leviim on Djerba, and there was great excitement among the locals when they found out that this writer is a Levi. Locals say the lack of Leviim dates to the time of Ezra HaSofer, who asked Jews from around the world to return to Eretz Yisrael. The Leviim in Djerba asked the prophet to promise there would not be another Churban, but he refused. As a result, the Levites of Djerba did not return to help rebuild Eretz Yisrael, and according to lore, he cursed the island, saying Leviim would die after one year on the island. Asked whether he could remember any Leviim in Djerba, one old man said seriously, “There once was one, but he would leave the island every summer for a month.”

Jewish Life Djerba’s Jews say their life is a good and rich one, and locals say the government is supportive of the community. Many stress that the word “Jewish” on their identity cards is a source of pride.

Still, the community seems to move carefully with regard to Israel. People carefully avoid the word “Israel” in public when speaking, for fear of arousing Muslim ire, and when this writer inquired about visiting the community in January, 2009, community leaders said it was “not a good time” for the community because of Operation Cast Lead, the IDF incursion to stop Hamas rocket fire from Gaza.

In private conversation, however, things are different. In hushed tones, all are quick to express pride in Israel’s accomplishments.

At the same time, Avi Feiffer said the Tunisian street was “quieter” during Cast Lead than any other country in the Middle East, a fact he credits to President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

“Tunisia is one of most open countries in the Middle East. Israelis can enter without a visa, and relations with the Moslem



Before the Jewish housewives insert their challah in this communal oven, they tie it into all sorts of interesting designs



Where wine is made: the winepress and clay jugs used to store kosher wine

population are generally and genuinely good. Even during the recent conflict, the streets of Tunis and certainly of Djerba were far less intimidating for Jews than the streets of Paris,” said Feiffer. He added that the Jews are free to travel and to immigrate, and said there would be no restrictions should they choose to leave. But he said the community is solid and comfortable.

Not that the community is immune to trouble. A 2002 al-Qaeda attack on the el-Ghriba shul killed twenty-one people, mostly tourists. But it was an isolated incident [as **Mishpacha** went to press a Paris court was set to convict Christian Ganczarski, a German convert to Islam, in the final trial stemming from the attack—Ed.], and on the whole, Djerban Jews say they have no plans to leave the island. Perhaps the future of Judaism on the island can be summed up thus: In 2008 there were twenty deaths in the community and eighty births.

Kashrus, another staple of community life, is a simpler matter than it is in Western countries. Mostly, this stems from a relatively simple way of life. Community *shochtim*

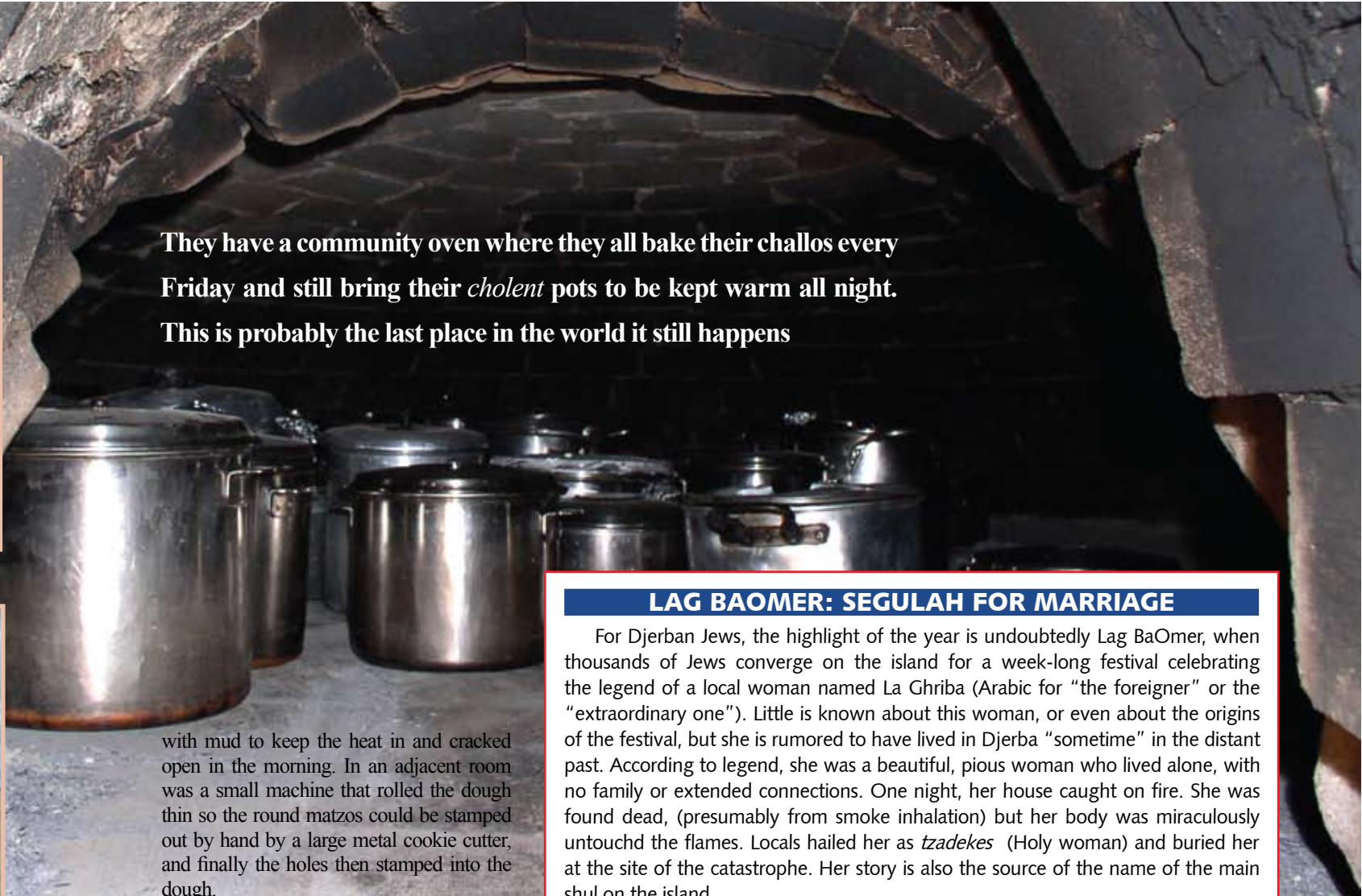
provide all the meat for the community, and there is low demand for cheese products. Fruits and vegetables are available in the souk, with the remainder of daily nutrition available at the local grocery apparently with no *hechsher* required (or at least none printed on packaging).

Many things that Western Jews take for granted are not the case in Tunisia. Wine is made next door to the ancient Jewish cemetery, in an ancient building used for a variety of kashrus enterprises, including flour grinding, matzoh baking, and wine making.

Wine made here is stored in huge clay jugs reported to be six hundred years old. Since the concern of non-*mevushal* wine being touched by a non-Jew is great, community leaders take great care to lock the building at night and to lock up tools, utensils, and especially wine when not there.

As our visit coincided with the run-up period to Pesach, the matzoh bakery was running in full swing. In the building near the cemetery, an olivewood-fired oven was the center of activity; every night it was sealed

They have a community oven where they all bake their challos every Friday and still bring their *cholent* pots to be kept warm all night. This is probably the last place in the world it still happens



with mud to keep the heat in and cracked open in the morning. In an adjacent room was a small machine that rolled the dough thin so the round matzohs could be stamped out by hand by a large metal cookie cutter, and finally the holes then stamped into the dough.

The *mashgiach*, an older man named Hawitta Hadad who wore a traditional red fez hat, watched over the process with a stern face and refused to pose for a photographer. “Photographs bring an *ayin hara*,” he said. But the workers were very friendly, and at the end of the evening one fellow took us home for dinner and shmoozing. His house had pretty much been dumped into the street while the women whitewashed and cleaned everything for Pesach. Not to be deterred, he put up a grill and made some liver to eat.

The building is also used for communal challah baking, reminiscent of the Mishnah in *Masechta Shabbos*. They have a community oven where they all bake their challos every Friday and still bring their *cholent* pots to be kept warm all night. This is probably the last place in the world it still happens. They do not need to do this as everyone has a stove in their house; however, they keep up the practice to keep the ancient traditions alive. Each family sends over a tray of dough tied in all sorts of interesting designs and somebody puts it in the oven and takes it out when ready, to be picked up by one of the kids. The *cholent* pots are loaded in just before Shabbos and the oven sealed, only to be opened in the morning for the *seudah*.

Djerba is also reminiscent of a Mishnah that describes an ancient custom to sound the shofar to alert farmers to conclude their labors for Shabbos. That custom might be

LAG BAOMER: SEGULAH FOR MARRIAGE

For Djerban Jews, the highlight of the year is undoubtedly Lag BaOmer, when thousands of Jews converge on the island for a week-long festival celebrating the legend of a local woman named La Ghriba (Arabic for “the foreigner” or the “extraordinary one”). Little is known about this woman, or even about the origins of the festival, but she is rumored to have lived in Djerba “sometime” in the distant past. According to legend, she was a beautiful, pious woman who lived alone, with no family or extended connections. One night, her house caught on fire. She was found dead, (presumably from smoke inhalation) but her body was miraculously untouched by the flames. Locals hailed her as *tzadekes* (Holy woman) and buried her at the site of the catastrophe. Her story is also the source of the name of the main shul on the island.

Today, her *yahrzeit* on Lag BaOmer attracts thousands of pilgrims, mainly ex-Tunisian Jews from France and Israel, who come to *daven* at her burial site and to beseech the Al-mighty for a wealth of material and spiritual needs. The event is considered a *segulah* for childbirth, and many childless women say they became pregnant after participating in this special event.

The centerpiece of the celebration is the *Grande Menara*, a wooden menorah shaped like a wedding and adorned with colorful scarves. Women spray the menorah as it is paraded through the streets of Djerba, and there’s an auction where spectators bid hundreds of Tunisian dinars for the right to ride a few yards atop the cart (the money goes to support the synagogue for the coming year). The procession is accompanied by musicians, and there is much joyous dancing and singing.

the reason for the siren that is sounded at candlelighting time in Jerusalem today; in Djerba, Rav Biton, the community *posek/shochet/mohel* and general-affairs expert, still climbs to a roof top and blows a shofar to announce the onset of Shabbos.

Long Live Tradition Back at the souk, Ethan, a member of our group and an amateur clock maker, tried several times to visit the old Jewish watchmaker, but repeatedly found the shop closed. Finally, on our last day in Tunisia, we rounded the corner of the Jewish courtyard and found the door of the tiny shop open. As we approached, we saw it was none other than the stern matzoh *mashgiach*, but on seeing Ethan’s enthusiasm for his profession, he opened up and we got a glimpse into a world almost gone.

The old man smiled proudly at his little shop and at all the little gadgets that he had made with his own hands and then flicked his eyes to the top of an old dusty book shelf in the corner. “See those books?” he asked. “Those are my *chiddushim*, my insights on all the books of the Torah, the Gemara, and all four sections of the *Shulchan Aruch*.”

Sitting at the watchmaker’s bench, in the middle of a souk in a Muslim country, sat a *talmid chacham* dressed in Muslim clothing and an Arab red fez of the old school. Next to his dusty old shop was the fifteen-year-old, enjoying his second day of business and his entry into the adult world of Djerba’s Jewish community — one giving to the other and sharing the *mesorah* of close to 3,000 years of Jewish tradition in Djerba. ■

— additional reporting by Avi Friedman