

# CLOSURE ON CRETE



HOW COULD WE PASS UP AN INVITATION TO SUCH AN UNUSUAL AFFAIR? IT WAS A BACK-TO-ROOTS BAR MITZVAH ON THE GREEK ISLAND OF CRETE, WHERE AN IDEALISTIC RABBI AND A LITTLE-USED SHUL — NOTHING MORE THAN A TOURIST ATTRACTION AND TESTIMONY TO A COMMUNITY THAT'S NO MORE — UNITED CRETE'S LAST JEW WITH HIS TRADITION. WE JUST HAD TO PARTICIPATE

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY  
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**A**lthough we'd never met the bar mitzvah boys or their parents before, we were thrilled to receive an invitation to what was surely one of the most memorable affairs we'd ever attended. The bar mitzvah boys were first cousins — one from Israel and the other from New York — and the venue was a 500-year-old restored but barely-used shul on the Greek island of Crete. This was the birthplace of the boys' grandfather, and it was the first bar mitzvah on Crete since World War II. A historic synagogue, a meeting of family from two ends of the world, and a young rabbi from Athens pulling it all together was a combination we couldn't resist. What other secrets would we discover on this once Jewishly vibrant island with nary a witness to its former glory?

**The Last Survivor** While geographically distant from any Jewish community, this affair was run in typical bar mitzvah style — held on a Monday so that all the friends and relatives could gather and be able to take pictures. As is true of the overwhelming majority of Greek Jewry today, this family too is not regularly observant, but Greece's

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chief rabbi, 27-year-old Athens-born Rabbi Gabriel Negrin had come prepared. He brought enough sets of tefillin for the two bar mitzvah boys, their fathers, and grandfathers, and assisted all who were interested in putting them on. The rabbi wore his special Greek rabbinic vestments under his tallis, and led a melodious Shacharis service — undeterred by the stifling heat (there was no air conditioning) and the people all around fanning themselves.

Rabbi Negrin, who spent several years in a Jerusalem yeshivah training for communal leadership before returning to Greece as the Jews' spiritual mentor, read the first *aliyah* in the unique Greek *nusach*, and each of the boys then read an *aliyah* as well — which Rabbi Negrin taught them via Skype.

While we and all the guests enjoyed the bar mitzvah, by far the biggest smile was on the face of maternal grandfather Sifi (Iossif) Ventura, who initiated the idea for the

celebration. At 77 years, he is possibly the last surviving Jew of the pre-war Crete Jewish community that was eradicated by the Nazis.

By the time the Nazis occupied the island in 1941, most of the Jews of Crete — which had Jewish presence all the way back to the time of the Second Temple — had either moved to the mainland cities of Athens and Salonika or left Greece altogether. But the Germans ordered a census of the remaining Jews and found 314 Jews in the town of Hania and 26 in the capital Heraklion. At first, the Nazis made a relatively benign decree — the collection of all *shechitah* knives. Then the Jews of Crete seem to have been forgotten about — until May 1944, when all those who had not fled were rounded up and loaded into the hold of the Nazi steamer Tanais together with Greek and Italian prisoners. They were headed for Auschwitz, but met their fate even sooner. The Tanais was spotted by a British submarine that launched two torpedoes and sank the ship within 15 minutes. No Jews

3.



1. After the Jews were shipped off to their deaths, the Etz Hayyim Synagogue was used as a dump, filled with dead animals and refuse. Although the Jews haven't returned, the shul has become a popular tourist attraction

2. During the restoration work, a pair of rimonim were unearthed - a carved wooden top with green paint and gold leaf on a copper base

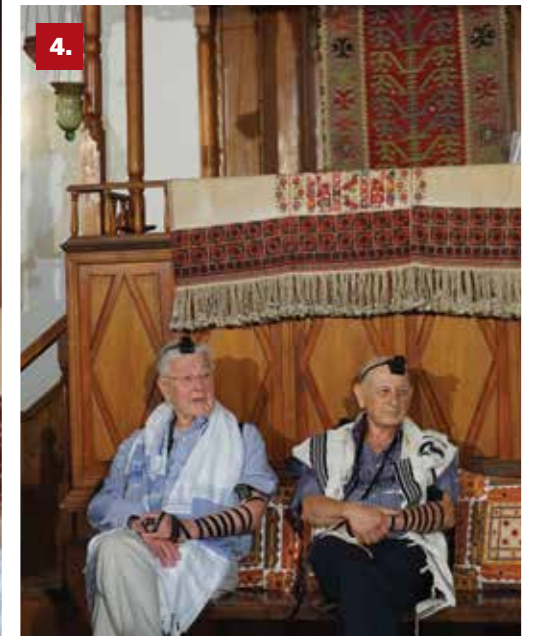
3. Iossif Ventura was thrilled that Rabbi Negrin took charge, bringing authentic Greek nusach to his back-to-roots celebration. We were happy to join the festivities

4. Two other grandfathers came to share in the festivities - and the rabbi made sure to bring enough sets of talleisim and tefillin for everyone

2.



4.



Jew, and even assumed the role of president of the Athens Jewish community. Iossif and his wife Rita raised their two daughters in Athens. Both girls eventually made their way to Israel, where Bianca met and married Dr. Robert Goldman and moved to New York, and Berry married Ran Lev and settled in Petach Tikvah. Their respective sons — Eitan and Benyo, who are three months apart — were reaching bar mitzvah age and Iossif thought it would be meaningful to have his grandsons celebrate together in the shul on the island of Crete, where he was born back in 1938.

**Years of Plenty** Today there are just a few individual Jews on Crete and no organized Jewish community. But that was not always the situation. Known for its pastoral beaches, high mountain range, rivers, and waterfalls, Crete has actually had a Jewish presence for over 2,100 years. Located about 600 miles from the coast of Eretz Yisrael, traders plied those tranquil Mediterranean waters from the earliest days of

survived. Among the victims were Rabbi Elias Osmos — the last rabbi of Crete — and 88 children of Hania.

Iossif and his family survived the war because his father got the entire Ventura family safely to Athens. Both Iossif's parents were from families who had lived on Crete for generations, but in 1942 a Christian friend of his father who was working as an interpreter for the Gestapo hinted to him what was in store and implored him to

flee. Abandoning everything, they stowed away on a *caique*, a traditional fishing boat carrying carobs. After a harrowing ten-day journey, the family arrived in Athens where they split up; Iossif spent the remainder of the war with a non-Jewish family, living next door to a German military camp.

Iossif clearly had a very limited Jewish education, but throughout the years has made attempts to study and try to learn more about his Jewish heritage. He's a proud

# ISLAND HERO



One of the highlights of our visit to Crete was sitting in the fragrant and shaded courtyard of the shul with the chief rabbi of Greece, Rabbi Gabriel Negrin. He showed us a recently reprinted book written by the former chief rabbi of Hania, Rabbi Abraham Evlagon — a personality who has been Rabbi Negrin's own inspiration as he's trying to infuse an unlearned, mostly secular population with the beauty of their traditions and heritage.

Rav Evlagon, born in Istanbul in 1946, was a *talmid chacham* who received *semichah* at age 22 in Istanbul, where he also learned *safrus*, *milah*, and *shechitah*. In

1876, at the age of 30, he left that center of Jewish life with his family and moved to a relative Torah vacuum of Crete with its uneducated but sincerely religious community to be the Haham Bashi of Crete.

His original appointment was made by Sultan Abdul Aziz and he faithfully served his post until his death in 1933. Like all rabbis during the Ottoman rule, he was a public servant and was paid a government salary. This exceptional man wrote a complete history of the island's Jews, including debunking the blood libel accusation that threatened the *kehillah* at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As an official Greek statesman, he received numerous medals for work as an emissary of the Greek government to European powers, but his first loyalty was to his own people. He welcomed Jews running from WWI and his first priority was to set up a Talmud Torah for those children. During a particular violent period of uprising, he actually sheltered the Greek Orthodox Bishop Nikephoros and saved him and 28 Christian families from certain death.

In his *sefer*, which he wrote at age 70 in flowery Hebrew, he described how after the Turks left and the Greeks took over, he no longer received his official salary and the poor community could not afford to pay him much. Yet despite his newfound poverty status, he stayed with the flock he'd nurtured for the past 40 years.

The first section of this fascinating book is a short biography. The second section is called "Nichnas Yayin," and is a collection of quotes from Tanach, *midrashim*, and Chazal, which he recommended reading, and the following section was a large discourse called "Yayin Harokach" about anti-Semitism and blood libels. One of the unique local customs that he records is the Purim of Crete. Like the Purim of Sarajevo and many other towns, it was instituted to celebrate a local miracle, this one from 1538. He records the date as 18 Tammuz, describing how in that year the Jews of the Cretan city of Candia were accused of hiding Turks, who were an opposition power to the Venetian Republic which controlled the island at the time. The Greek population of Candia gathered to attack the Jews for this supposed act of treachery. Rabbi Eliyahu Capsali sought help from the Venetians, who intervened and prevented a massacre. Thereafter, the 18th of Tammuz was observed throughout Cretan Jewish communities as the Purim of Candia.

civilization. There is even a letter from Shimon the Maccabee sent to the ruler of Crete in 142 BCE expressing support for the local Jews. Josephus, the famous historian from the end of the Second Temple period, married a Jewish Cretan.

And Crete even had one of the earliest false messiahs. Based on various calculations, there were those who expected the arrival of Mashiach sometime between the Jewish years 4200 and 4250, corresponding to 440–490 CE. From the beginning of the fifth century, the Byzantine emperor had imposed harsh decrees on the local Jewish community and they were ripe for redemption. According to the contemporary Socrates of Constantinople, in the year 448 CE a man named Moses of Crete announced that he had been sent to bring the Jews back to Jerusalem. In the motif of Nachshon displaying his confidence in G-d by jumping into the Red Sea, Moses of Crete led his large following to a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean and instructed them to take the plunge. Many of them drowned, while puzzled Cretan fishermen rescued others. Moses of Crete, of course, had stood back to watch them jump and then disappeared with their money.

Owing to its location, Crete early on became a commercial center and, as expected, the Jews played a significant role in the island's economic development. By the 12th century the Jews were a solid middle class of merchants. Despite that status, the Venetians, who ruled Crete from 1212 to 1669 and oversaw the flowering of its culture, passed discriminatory regulations that relegated the Jews to a ghetto, had them affix identifying signs to their houses and badges to their clothes, and barred them from owning land. This was followed by blood libels that continued into the 19th century.

But none of this stunted their growth, and at the end of the 1400s, the 400 Romaniote Jewish families on the island were joined by hundreds of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula following their expulsion.

The island produced many Torah scholars as well — one of the most well known was

WITH SO FEW JEWS ON THE ISLAND, ONE MIGHT WONDER WHO ACTUALLY RUNS THE SYNAGOGUE. IN FACT, IT'S CARED FOR WITH GREAT DEVOTION BY A NON-JEWISH GERMAN WOMAN WHO MARRIED A NATIVE OF CRETE. AFTER RETURNING WITH HIM TO HIS ISLAND PARADISE, SHE SOON FOUND HER CALLING

את אשכנז ירושלים

השכח יב



Rabbi Negrin and his charges Eitan and Benyo, whom he taught via Skype how to read an aliyah. (Inset) As he lights the *ner tamid*, he's trying to keep the light burning for all of Greece's remaining Jews



Rabbi Yaakov Culi (1689-1732), author of the *Meam Loetz* — but due to political unrest in the late 19th century and the annexation of Crete by Greece in 1913, the Jews began to leave. By the 1930s, the community in Hania — the town we visited and the center of the island's Jewish community — had dwindled to just a few hundred and could no longer support the local Talmud Torah.

**Muslim Ban** For several hundred years prior to WWII, the Jewish community in Hania was predominantly in the Jewish quarter (called the “Ovraiki”) of the old city, which is now a major, bustling tourist attraction as cruise ships leave off boatloads of visitors on the island every day. Together with the throngs of other visitors, we parked a good distance from the old city. And as we walked — the port to our left, the city wall to our right — we began to understand why this island attracts so many tourists. Branching off from the seaside main road that is lined with restaurants are many

narrow cobblestone streets that meander through the old city, replete with coffee shops and tourist traps.

This region has been through many occupiers and that was evident in the structures. For example, as we entered one shop we noticed in the corner what looked like an old stone niche. Indeed, this building had previously been a mosque and what we were looking at was the *mihrab*, the semicircular niche in the wall that points toward Mecca. And in the opposite corner was the remnant of the mosque's minaret. Today though, there are very few Muslims in Greece and almost no legal mosques. Well over 95 percent of the Greek population is Christian Greek Orthodox, and because Greece was occupied for centuries by the Muslim Ottoman Empire, today there is strong anti-Muslim sentiment in the country. Additionally, a population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923 involved approximately two million people and transferred almost all of Turkey's Orthodox Christian to Greece and most of Greece's Muslim citizens to Turkey

— leaving Greece with almost no Muslims.

We, of course, wanted to know how to get to the synagogue. After weaving through the alleyways, we came to an ancient gateway with Hebrew writing. We had arrived at the Etz Hayyim synagogue, the only shul on the island and the site of the bar mitzvah. The fabulous story of the reconstruction of the shul after 50 years of abandonment is the story of Nikos Stavroulakis. He is responsible for its reconstruction and for its continued function as a place of worship and life cycle events.

**Entangled Roots** The son of a Turkish Jewish mother and a Greek Orthodox father from Crete, Nikos grew up in Britain and spent time in the US before returning to Greece. Living in Athens in the 1970s, he co-founded and directed the Jewish Museum of Athens, and wrote several books about Greek-Jewish history and Greek-Jewish cooking. He is also an artist (his first exhibition was in 1959), painter, printer, and art

historian and has written about the traditional garb of the Greek Jews. As his family roots were in Crete, he'd visited the island many times and knew of the former Jewish community that no longer had a remnant. After retiring in 1995, he moved to Crete and began a new phase in his life, dedicated to rebuilding the hovel of a building that was the shul, and re-establishing some form of Jewish life in Hania, which now includes a weekly Kabbalas Shabbos and Shabbos davening if a minyan of tourists is around.

The reconstruction of the Etz Hayyim Synagogue began in 1996 and the shul was officially reopened in 1999. Now 85 years old, Nikos has difficulty navigating the stairs and alleyways of the old city and was not even able to make it to the bar mitzvah. But we couldn't be in this town and not visit the man behind it all, and so we made our way to his house — secluded from the tourist hubbub by stone

walls, a private garden, birds, chickens and a bubbling fishpond.

Before Stavroulakis arrived on the scene, the shul was in total ruins — the roof had collapsed and water was flowing out from under the foundations. It was used as a dump, filled with dead animals and refuse, and chickens roamed freely. It's thought that the building dates back to the 15th century and was originally a Catholic church built by Venetians when they ruled the island. In the mid-16th century it was heavily damaged and left abandoned, and in the mid-17th century it was acquired by the Jewish community who repaired it and began using it as a synagogue. In 1900 Baron Albert Rothschild of Vienna contributed to some minor repairs that were needed.

After its rededication, Stavroulakis donated a large part of his own extensive library, and other books were added to create a respectable Jewish reference library. But

anti-Semites, whom the police have not yet caught, have targeted the shul several times, destroying most of the library in an arson blaze.

There is still a small display case in the shul that features a few of the historic items. Rabbi Negrin proudly showed us a rusty Torah *rimon* and explained that during the restoration work a pair of *rimonim* was found buried. They apparently had been quite intricate with a copper base and a heavily carved wooden top in a foliate design with green paint and gold leaf. Exact replicas were created by local craftsman and are now used for the shul's *sifrei Torah*. And the water that was oozing out from the foundation? That was actually the underground spring that fed the mikveh. The mikveh has also been repaired and once again is used — primarily by Rabbi Negrin when he visits.

The back courtyard of the shul contains four old graves. While the main Jewish

cemetery is on the outskirts of the city, four local rabbis were buried inside the synagogue compound in the mid-19th century. The four rabbis were Rabbi Joseph Ben Shalom (d. 1821) and his brother, Rabbi Baruh Ben Shalom (d. 1841), Rabbi Avraham Z. Habib of Gallipoli (d. 1858), and Rabbi Hillel Eskenazi, a noted mystic and kabbalist (d. 1710). Rabbi Joseph Ben Shalom died while the Jews were barricaded within the Jewish quarter, possibly because of the unrest of the nascent Greek revolution.

There is another tombstone there as well, with its own interesting story. In a small family-owned hotel in Hania, there is an eclectic display of old Hania artifacts, and one of those historical curiosities was a Jewish tombstone. According to the proprietors of the hotel, the tombstone was found in discarded rubble after WWII. The writing is still completely legible and thus we know that it once marked the final resting place of a man named Yaakov Leon who died in 1724, almost 300 years ago.

Approaching the shul, we saw there was a bulletin board of announcements, and while there weren't many upcoming activities listed, one message was clearly stated: "Please note: the food in the 'synagogue' café adjacent to the synagogue is NOT KOSHER."

The café, located in a neighboring building that used to be the Talmud Torah, advertizes that it has a "mystical atmosphere," although so far it has refused to return the building to the synagogue compound.

There had been a second shul in Crete as well — the Beth Shalom Synagogue — but it was completely destroyed during WWII and on its location now stands another restaurant.

With so few Jews on the island, one might wonder who actually runs the synagogue.

In fact, it's cared for with great devotion by Anja Zuckmantel, a non-Jewish German woman who married a native of Crete. After returning with him to his island paradise, she soon found her calling — as administrator and historian of the Etz Hayyim synagogue, which she has now done diligently and lovingly for ten years. It is more than a job, she says — it's become her passion. She was more than happy to share of her knowledge about the Jewish community and facilitate our visit in any way possible.

**Doorways to the Past** At the bar mitzvah itself, the festive event gave us the opportunity to meet the Israeli grandparents as well. Grandma Aliza Lev shared with us that when her son Ran married Berry, the wedding took place in Athens. Her own mother — the groom's maternal grandmother — was originally from Eastern Europe and got to Eretz Yisrael after the war; Berry's maternal grandmother was originally from Salonika. The Israeli bubbly spoke no Greek or Ladino; the Greek bubbly spoke no Yiddish or Hebrew. But that didn't matter. When they met, they looked at each other, immediately saw the numbers on the other's arm, and somehow managed to communicate. It turns out that the two grandmothers were just a few bunks away from each other in Auschwitz.

As happy as everyone was to be back in the land of their ancestors, it was the young, energetic chief rabbi of Greece who really put the event in its historic and religious context. Growing up in Athens, Rabbi Gabriel Negrin's career trajectory was clear from an early age: He was always drawn to Jewish ritual, and even as a youngster sought out the city's Jewish elders to learn



While the main cemetery is on the outskirts of the city, four local rabbis were buried inside the synagogue compound (top); Nikos Stavroulakis, the elderly unsung hero of Crete's Jewish rededication (middle); the food in the "Synagogue Cafe" is admittedly not kosher even though the place is advertized to have a "mystical atmosphere" — perhaps due to the picture of a holy rabbi above the treif kitchen

from. Negrin has not only studied the rabbinic curriculum that all *semichah* students must master, but also pores over rare texts dealing with Greek Jewish customs. He has a second love, too, and that is music, in which he has university degrees.

Rabbi Negrin, who lived in Crete while studying in university there, is intimately familiar with all the small lanes and alleyways around the shul, and he graciously gave us a Jewish tour as we meandered through the neighborhood, spotting marks on doorposts where mezuzahs had previously been affixed.

One house actually still had a mezuzah — turns out it had been the home of Rabbi Avraham Evlagon, Hania's former chief rabbi who passed away in 1933. (Today the house is owned and used by the shul.) Rabbi Negrin told us that while he was in university, he rented an apartment in the old Jewish quarter and noticed that on the doorway into the bathroom there was a mark that looked

like a mezuzah had once been there. He was perplexed by the fact that there seemed to have been a mezuzah on a bathroom door and went to speak to the current non-Jewish owner about it. The owner explained that the room hadn't always been a bathroom, but when he turned part of the house into an apartment for rental, he cut the kitchen in half and converted part of it into a bathroom. He told Rabbi Negrin that there had actually been strange little boxes on each doorway with parchments inside each one. When the rabbi asked what happened to them, he was told that they had all been thrown away.

**Flame Forever** Once the festivities ended and the guests departed, we re-entered the shul and found Rabbi Negrin lighting an oil lamp up front. He explained that the *ner tamid* holds a special place in Greek Jewish tradition

— it was customarily lit daily in shul, and many people lit one at home as well. We found great symbolism in Rabbi Negrin's action. He is truly trying to keep a light of Torah lit for Crete and for all the remaining Jews of Greece. Like so many of these very old communities that dwindled due to socio-political factors and were then destroyed by the Nazis, the Etz Hayyim synagogue will likely never see an active religious Jewish community again. But to think about the antiquity of Jewish practice on this tiny outpost in the middle of the Mediterranean reminds us of the staying power that has kept us going for millennia. And we wish grandfather Iossif Ventura, Rabbi Gabriel Negrin, and the dedicated staff of the Etz Hayyim synagogue well, as they each in their own way strive to keep the Greek *ner tamid* alive. ●