

An Old World treasure

Though approaching 90, Kurdish Jewry's Rabbi Haim Yeshurun is still a preeminent leader of his community

• By ARI GREENSPAN and ARI Z. ZIVOTOFKY

This is the tale of our encounter with an anachronism, a living treasure from the past, and the touching relationship we have developed with 89-year-old Rabbi Haim Yeshurun. As part of our ongoing project to locate living links in the vital chain of Jewish tradition we first met Rabbi Yeshurun six years ago and have relished his friendship ever since.

On Tisha Be'av in 1950, together with his children and pregnant wife, he arrived at a tent camp in Binyamina. They had escaped from Kurdistan to join fleeing Iraqis in Iran

at a transit camp known as "the gate of aliya," from whence they would be flown to Israel. With deep sadness and lingering resentment, he relates that as he was boarding the plane he was forced to surrender a cherished signed family tree to a representative of the Jewish Agency, and it was never returned. He is the 12th generation of Jewish functionaries including scribes, ritual slaughterers, *mohalim* and community leaders, and the document had the signatures of ancestors from each of those previous generations.

Haim was born in Turkey in 1919 and originally named Hanukka, for the date of his birth. His parents and their five chil-

dren fled through the mountains to Kurdistan, making stops in more than a dozen villages, and eventually "settling" in a small village of 23 Jewish families. Because Jews were not permitted to own land, they were peddlers rather than farmers and often wandered about in pursuit of a livelihood.

On one of those treks through the mountain footpaths when Haim was about two years old, his father thought the boy had died and, although it was Shabbat, dug a shallow grave in which to bury him. While his mother wailed and the customary dust from the Land of Israel was being placed on his eyelids, she thought she saw them flutter and refused to abandon him. His father grew angry and hushed his wife lest the entire family be discovered and killed. The mother in her grief took her baby from his grave and carried him on her back through the mountains. At a cold spring, she dunked him in the water and he started crying, whereupon his name was changed from Hanukka to Haim, "life."

The Jews of Kurdistan were only weakly connected with the rest of the Jewish world for many centuries. This remarkable community has its roots in parts of northern Syria, Azerbaijan, Armenia, parts of Iran, northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey. The harsh topography and the oppressive rulers made contact with them difficult. Many felt their ancestry was part of the Ten Tribes, exiled to Assyria after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. It is commonly held that they settled there at the time of Ezra the scribe and did not return to Israel with the returnees of Babylon.

Writing in about 1170, the traveler Benjamin of Tudela records that about 20,000 Jews existed in hundreds of small communities. One of the more unusual personas in their history was Tanna'it Asenath Barzani, who lived in Mosul from 1590 to 1670 and was famous for her knowledge of the Torah, Talmud, Kabbala and Jewish law. After her husband's death, she was the head of yeshiva at Amadiyah, and eventually was recognized as the chief instructor of Torah in Kurdistan.

In recent times, the first Kurdish Jews made their way to Jerusalem in 1812 and by 1896 there were a number of families from Urfa, Ur Kasdim of the Bible, living in the Holy City. Rabbi Yisrael Benjamin wrote that in the 1800s when word would spread in Kurdistan that a messenger had arrived from Jerusalem they would place him on their shoulders and take him to the house of the head of the community where they washed his feet, and then drank the water which contained the dust of Jerusalem. Their situation was one of terrible oppression and attacks. Blood libels wiped out entire communities and some even became Muslim to save themselves. The local Muslims held that wet items "are impure and make impure those who touch or carry them" so they would not touch the Jews or their wet items, because the Jews were considered to be vile and impure.

By 1948 there were 25,000-50,000 souls and almost all of them came to Israel, where there are today an estimated 100,000-150,000 "*Kurdim*." Owing to the terrible conditions in which they lived and the oppressive treatment they received at the hands of the locals, Rabbi Yeshurun, a bright, well-read man, told us that he has no longing to ever return to the land of his origins and does not express any goodwill to the locals.

A Kurdish Jew praying in the mountains.

WE FIRST went to see him about six years ago in our ongoing 11th-hour mission to record the oral traditions of disappearing ancient communities regarding bird species that they held to be kosher. We arrived in Holon, where he is the rabbi of the Kurdish community, to find high-rise buildings surrounding his courtyard and modest, 1950s era house, with the rabbi in a long galabia robe sitting and studying and writing. We walked in with a stuffed partridge. He looked at the bird and immediately told us that he recognized it and that "in Turkish it is called *kiklic* and in Kurdish it is called *kakwanta* [writing out the word in Hebrew letters in my book of kashrut laws], and in Hebrew it is *hogla*. We used to eat it in Kurdistan and also in the transit camp in Binyamina. It is a kosher bird and we have a tradition from our fathers in our hand."

An expert slaughterer, he originally learned the craft in Turkey, but his expertise is evident from the document he showed us – within less than a year of arriving here, he had a letter from chief rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel attesting to his skill and knowledge as a *shohet*.

This remarkable man, whose life has been spent in formal teaching and as an informal Jewish communal functionary both here and in Kurdistan, is as sharp as a tack as he approaches 90. When asked about personal events, whether from three or 60 years ago, he instinctively responds that he does not remember, then after a moment's pause, he quickly says, "Yes, I remember," and proceeds to relate the information complete with names and dates.

His only teachers were his father, whom he references often, and his older brother. When Rav Haim was about five years old his father decided it was time for him to commence his education and started him near

the beginning of the book of Exodus. Impressed by his apparent ability, his father told him to memorize the chapter for the next day and thenceforth to appear each day with a new chapter committed to memory. With only a sense of gratitude, he relates with a smile that his father would tolerate one grammatical mistake; two would result in a slap. He quickly learned the entire Bible, which he still knows inside and out, and also has an unrivaled command of Hebrew grammar. He several times instinctively corrected our Hebrew, but, being a gentleman, he then sheepishly apologized.

he did not have his own pair but had to use his father's.

As a testament to the tenacity with which the Kurdish Jewish community preserved our laws, he related how he was an expert in *halitza*, the rare ritual in which a childless widow is released from marrying her deceased husband's brother.

When we discussed his circumcision technique, he paused, smiled and asked if we would like to hear a good story. Knowing this was going to be a keeper, we sat back and waited. His father, the local *mohel*, was out of town and a man came and told him that his

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Hebrew is not the only language he has mastered. The Kurdish Jews spoke what many consider a dead language, Aramaic. Not quite the Aramaic of the Talmud, but sort of a pidgin Aramaic. Speaking Turkish, Arabic, Hebrew and the two dialects of Aramaic spoken by the Kurdish Jews, Rabbi Yeshurun has translated the Bible into their Aramaic. In 1950, Aramaic speakers were rare among the staff at the transit camp and nobody else on the flight spoke Hebrew, so he quickly became the translator and representative of the group. His Hebrew was of course not modern, but biblical. While describing audio tapes that had been made years ago he referred to them as "the taking of his voice," and while they had seen things occasionally flying high in the sky while in Kurdistan, they did not know what an airplane was until the Israelis appeared to bring them here.

son needed a *brit* that day. The baby's father was insistent that the boy would have it done that day despite the protestations of the young Haim Yeshurun. Having trained under his father, and observed circumcisions, he had no choice but to do his first brit. He had everything he needed except for the protective shield used by mohalim to avoid cutting too much. Smiling at us, he related how he went to a vine and cut down a gourd. From the gourd he whittled a piece into the proper shape and with that he went on to do the first of many circumcisions.

In Kurdistan everything was homemade. The matzot, from the cutting of the grain, were supervised by him. The construction of the mikve, which he insisted was used by all in the observance of family purity laws despite the fact that most of the townsfolk were uneducated, was constructed by him, and the shofar was fashioned by his father. In fact when he arrived in Binyamina, one of his first acts was to build a mikve.

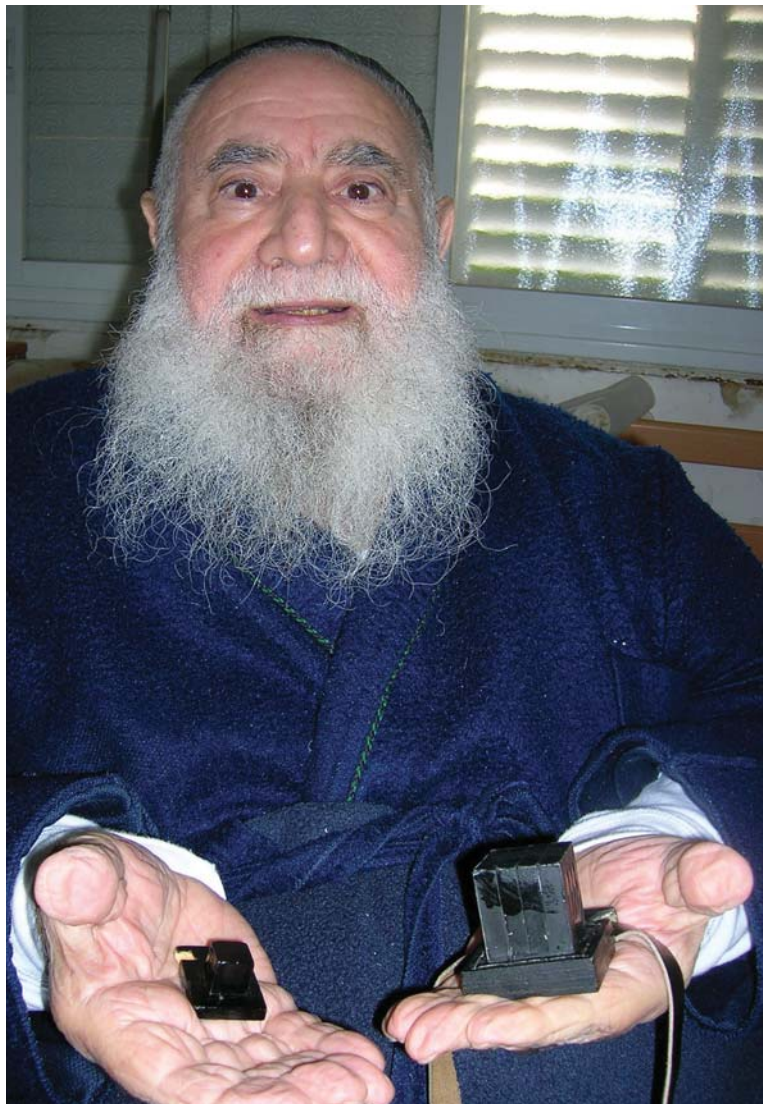
Rabbi Yeshurun spent his working years in a variety of occupations including teacher, school principal and kashrut supervisor. In addition, he served his community in numerous ritual capacities. Today, well into his retirement he continues to serve his community albeit in a reduced capacity. The majority of his time is now taken up with writing. He has published one book that is part autobiography and part his thoughts on a variety of topics, including comparative religion. In addition to being steeped in Jewish knowledge, he is well versed in both New Testament and Koranic literature and his bookshelves have literature in all of the languages he speaks.

His desk is piled high with filled notebooks and he continues to write, by hand of course, during all his free time. When queried as to their content, he would only smile and say, "Things I want my family to know when I am gone."

We asked him about the day he arrived in Israel. Starting to get emotional 57 years after the fact, he told us that they disembarked from the plane and immediately got down on their knees and kissed the ground. He started to cry as he related this story and again relived the emotions of that moment.

As we parted, we clutched his hand and wished him many more years of health, happiness and the ability to continue serving his community. Not to be outdone, he put his hand on our heads and with tears in his eyes, blessed us with all that and much more. ■

Rabbi Yeshurun with a few prized possessions.



AMONG HIS many skills, he is a ritual scribe. He told us with pride of the seven Torahs he has written, as well as the dozens of megillot and mezuzot. When we visited him most recently, in January, we were amazed to find him seated in a wheelchair, dressed in a robe, an oxygen tank against the wall by his hospital bed and visitors still requesting that he check their mezuzot or adjust the knots on their tefillin. He unrolled one of the mezuzot, peered for a second and smiled at us proudly "This is one of mine; I wrote it about seven years ago."

When we asked him about who made the parchment on which to write the Torahs in Kurdistan, he was genuinely offended as he responded that he did of course. He would ritually slaughter the animal, remove the skin, work it into *klaf*, prepare the ink and quill and write the Torah. He similarly took offense when we asked about who performed marriages, and he responded that he would then and there write out for us by heart a ketuba.

Because Rabbi Yeshurun and we share interests in many Jewish skills and arts, we tried to debrief him on all of their traditional techniques from ink making to matza baking, from parchment manufacture to how he removed the forbidden fats from animals he slaughtered. They rarely had etrogim in Kurdistan. Once in a while, one might appear from Iraq and the word would go out and all would hurry to make the blessing on the four species. They were unable to manufacture tefillin and the ones they had came from Baghdad. Smuggling them across the border was a risky business and thus tefillin were a rare and treasured commodity. When he became bar mitzva,