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Mishpacha

# Sailing Upstream

When we decided on a trip down the Amazon, we knew we'd behold breathtaking vistas and magical rainforests — and we hoped to find some Jews on the banks of the world's most massive river. Like every region that beckoned safety and financial opportunity, a town on the Amazon proved to be a haven for an oppressed people— but will the remnant be washed away with the rains?

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY *Ari Greenspan and Ari Z. Zivotofsky*



The boat slowly backed out of the dock, turned around, and put the motors full throttle. It looked like we were heading into an ocean; in fact, we were headed down the Amazon River. The Amazon? You're probably raising your eyebrows — did we think we'd find ancient Jewish communities or unusual animals to *shecht* traveling down South America's monster waterway?

Well, rivers often spawned civilizations, and historically, Jewish communities as well. Traditionally, cultures have always sprung up along the banks of rivers, with the earliest cities being along the Tigris and Euphrates — the birthplace of Avraham Avinu and many centuries later, the land where the Talmud Bavli was written. Major cities and Jewish communities were formed along the Rhine and Main rivers in Germany. Even the Land of Israel is known by its main river, the Jordan, although by international standards it is more like a creek. When one thinks of large rivers, the Nile comes to mind, and indeed Jews, including Moshe Rabbeinu and Moshe Maimonides, lived along its banks. At 6,800 kilometers (4,200 miles), it's the longest river in the world. But in terms of sheer volume of water, no river holds a candle to the mighty Amazon, flowing over 6,400 kilometers (over 4,000

miles) — slightly shorter than the Nile but still equivalent to the distance between New York and Rome. (Actually, the length of the Amazon has been the subject of debate for close to a century, and some claim that it's indeed slightly longer than the Nile.) The Amazon reaches up to 50 miles wide; and Marajo, the world's largest freshwater island at its mouth, is the size of Switzerland. The Amazon is joined and engorged by many smaller rivers (each enormous by world standards), discharging an awesome 200,000 cubic meters of freshwater every second, more than the world's next six biggest rivers combined. This gargantuan river is surrounded by 5,500,000 square kilometers (2,100,000 square miles) of dense rainforest, one of the last unexplored areas of the world. It discharges close to 20 percent of the world's freshwater into the Atlantic Ocean, which can still be tasted 100 miles out in the ocean. But Jews? What would bring Jews to a backward, primitive region with sweltering heat, disease, and rain forests? Yet there are indeed Jewish communities along the river. The largest remaining Jewish community is in Belém, a city of 1.5 million people not far from the mouth of the river on the Atlantic, which today boasts about 450 Jewish families. On this trip, we chose to visit Manaus, capital of the state of Amazonas in northwest Brazil and a five-day boat ride upriver. (We took a plane.) The remote city has an active Jewish community of about 120 families (850 Jews).

**Tipping the Scales** Although we flew to Brazil, what's a visit to the Amazon region without at least a short boat journey? Our first stop on the route was a floating gas station. While the boat filled up, the 20 or so tourists disembarked and purchased coffee and sodas, just like in a land-based roadside rest stop. A few hours later, we glided into a floating restaurant. Although there was almost nothing that we could eat, as luck would have it, we were

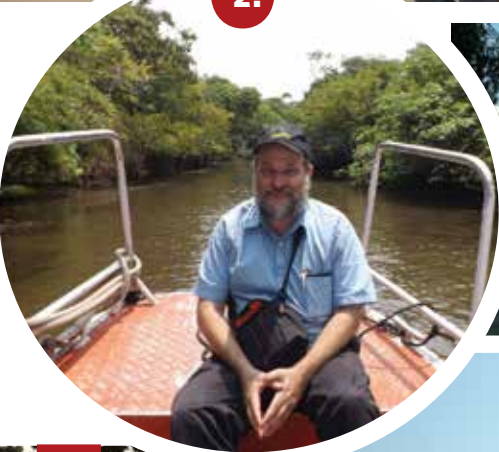


In the middle of the Amazon River, a floating gas station



1.

1. Moroccan tradition on the banks of the Amazon. Dr. Dahan (right) moved from a small village on the Amazon to Manaus, where he currently serves as *chazzan* at the shul (pictured). On the left is Mr. Salomão Israel Benchimol, the president of the community



2.

2. Ari Z. takes in the sights along the river. A submerged forest is in the background



3.

3. The Jewish cemetery, separated by fence from the final resting places of the area's Christian residents



4.

4. Ari G. takes advantage of the rock-bottom price for a haircut — no shop needed — right on the streets of Manaus



5.

5. The grave of the tzaddik Rabbi Shalom Imanuel Muiyal, still remembered by the Jews and revered by local Christians as a miracle worker



about to find an answer to a halachic question we received a few weeks before heading out on this trip, regarding the kashrus of a gigantic Amazonian fish that can grow to an astounding 4.5 meters long. It’s called a paiche, also known as arapaima or pirarucu, and is sometimes sold in New York area supermarkets. When it comes to fish, kashrus status is pretty straightforward — as long as it can be confirmed that the fish has easily removable scales (which automatically means it has fins), it is kosher. Having never seen this fish, and having no access to it in Israel, we were not sure if it was kosher. Now we found ourselves first on a floating village in the Amazon feeding that species of fish, and then on the floating restaurant. While everyone else was eating the nonkosher food, we headed to the small kitchen and requested to see a pirarucu with its skin. We readily confirmed that it is kosher, with its huge, easily removable scales.

Now we know there was some kosher fish for the early Jewish settlers, but how and why did they end up in this exotic, difficult-to-reach, poor city in the first place? The first Jews actually arrived in the Amazon region in 1810 from Morocco, and there is still an extant tombstone from 1848. There is a popular misconception that historically, while Jews in Christian Europe suffered from oppressive anti-Semitism, the Jews in Arab lands lived in harmony with the majority rulers until Zionism aroused anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic sentiments.

But the Jews of 19th century Morocco could challenge any such assertion. While the arrival of Europeans enabled many Jews in northern Moroccan ports to advance socioeconomically, it actually meant greater poverty among Jews in the interior. Many destitute Jews began to move to already overcrowded cities, and that, coupled with ill-fated midcentury Moroccan-European wars that resulted in the Jews being labeled unfortunate scapegoats, meant the desperate Moroccan Jews scanned the map looking for a safe haven with economic potential. Enter the Amazonian rubber boom.

**Stretched by the Rubber Boom** Natural rubber comes from the rubber tree that grows in tropical regions. It was discovered and used by the South American Indians thousands of years ago, but it wasn’t until the 1800s that Europeans discovered practical uses for it. This new demand led to what is known as the first rubber boom, which began in 1879 and led to fantastic wealth for the region and the rapid urbanization of Belém and Manaus — the most advanced cities in Brazil at the time. Soon these cities had electricity, running water, and sewers. Imposing European-style luxury buildings were constructed, pound sterling became the local currency, and Manaus became the leading city in the sale of diamonds. This newfound prosperity brought many Jewish families, and even more single men, to the Amazon region.

Then the bottom fell out. Using seeds smuggled out of Brazil,



6. A perch atop a huge floating log affords a visitor a closer view of the meter-wide Victoria water lily



7. With a woman serving as president, the Jews of Manaus added a lectern to the women’s section, allowing her to make the requisite announcements without entering the men’s section of the shul

8. Not your garden variety. Ari G. gets friendly with a monster anaconda snake



the British planted rubber trees in Southeast Asia, and due to their greater efficiency, the British Empire quickly dominated the world rubber market. The economy of the Amazon region plummeted. The rich left, taxes dried up, buildings were abandoned, and poverty ensued. A short-lived second rubber boom took place during World War II when the Japanese occupied Southeast Asia, but the Amazon region never recovered.

It was during the 19th-century rubber boom that the Moroccan Jews made their trek to the Amazon. They hacked through forests, braved the tropical heat, battled disease, dealt with Native Americans, and made their way up and down the most complex ecosystem on the planet — all in an attempt to make a better life for themselves and their children, a life that included religious freedom and economic opportunity.

All told, this migration included about 1,000 families and untold numbers of single young men. Originally, the Jews were peddlers, although on the Amazon, they didn’t use pushcarts, but rather plied their wares up and down the river on their boats. They would stop in the cities to pick up products, which they would then sell along the river in the small villages, where they in turn picked up indigenous wares to be sold in the cities. The Jews of the Amazon, therefore, were not solely “big-city Jews.” Some clusters consisting of no more than three or four families also made their homes in the region’s many small villages.

**Moroccan Mystique** To Ashkenazim, all Moroccans might seem the same, but within their community there are differences in *minhag* between the native Moroccans and those who arrived after the Spanish-Portuguese expulsions 500 years ago. Some of these differences are significant, such as how to define *treifos* in the lungs of cows. There are also subtle differences in the prayer service. Thus Beth Yacov, the first synagogue founded in Manaus in 1928, was the synagogue for descendants of the expellees. Due to the disagreements between them and the native Moroccans, a second synagogue, Rebi Meyr, was built a few years later. In the 1950s, the community faced steady erosion and each synagogue had difficulty getting a minyan. And so in 1962 they joined forces to build one new shul, known as Beth Yacov Rebi Meyr.

It is to this shul that its *chazzan*, Dr. Isaac Dahan, a dentist and gastroenterologist by profession, took us. The first thing we couldn’t help notice was the large concrete wall separating the shul from the street. Dr. Dahan almost apologetically told us that it used to be more aesthetic, with a lower wall, but “the Israelis told us we should make it higher for security reasons.” The interior of the main synagogue is well-kept, indicating it’s clearly an active shul. The most unusual feature — one that we had never seen before in any shul — is the large *shtender* front and center in the women’s balcony. The shul’s president, Mr. Salomão Israel Benchimol, explained that the previous president of the community had been Anne Benchimol, a woman who was very helpful in setting up our trip. (Yes — the names hint at the





9. A wall separates the graves of Manaus's Christians from the graves of local Jews



10. View of the aron kodesh in Manaus, home of the treasured sefer Torah written centuries ago in Spain



11. Ari Z. examines a tree sloth

fact that the presidency has indeed run in the family for many years.) Within this traditional community, there was never any question of mixed seating in shul, and thus, in order to accommodate the public addresses of the female president, they added the lectern in the balcony.

While we toured the shul, one of the community employees came in and told us her family story. She is the only one still in Brazil; the others are all in Israel. When we asked her where they live, she listed several places, and mentioned that she has a chareidi brother living in Neve Yaakov. “We were raised in a traditional, kosher home,” she said. “Now my brother is preserving the traditions, and I am the one who unfortunately is keeping them less.”



10.

**What’s in a Name?** Having done our research before we arrived, we wanted to see the real treasure in the shul. We asked our hosts to open the *aron kodesh*, and were surprised to see the large number of *sifrei Torah*. But that’s not what we were looking for. The prize — and the pride of their community — was the Torah scroll standing on the far right. Recent research confirms that it was written in Spain, probably 450 years ago, and it then accompanied the expelled Jews to Morocco. It was brought to the Amazonas by Jews seeking a better life as they made their way up the Amazon River. The *sefer Torah* was originally brought to the tiny village of Itacoatiara, 270 kilometers downstream from Manaus, where a handful of Jews had settled at the end of the 19th century. By the 1950s, there were no Jews left there and the Torah migrated upstream to Manaus, where it is treated as a prized possession. It is removed from the *aron* and used just once a year, on Yom Kippur. And although over the years a significant number of Jews have moved to Israel from the Amazon region, all suggestions to bring this Torah scroll on aliyah have been fervently rejected by the community — they take great pride in it and its link to their origins. However, due to age and the region’s humidity, the scroll has not fared well, and there are many holes in the parchment.

The shul is the center of the organized Jewish community, known in Portuguese as Comite Israelita do Amazonas. It is an active community and one that takes great pride in its accomplishments. We were not able

# Splitting the Sea

Months earlier, when we had researched the Jewish settlements of the Amazon, we had heard about an astounding phenomenon known as “The Meeting of Waters,” in which the flowing sandy-colored Amazon River is joined by the Rio Negro, a river with black-hued water. For six kilometers after the confluence of these two rivers, their waters continue to flow side by side without mixing. It’s a major tourist attraction, and as we recited the *brachah* on G-d’s wonders, we understood why. While a similar effect happens to a lesser degree in other rivers and it is explainable by the differences in temperature and speed of the two rivers, seeing a phenomenon of such magnitude up close evokes a sense of amazement and wonderment. Our boat stopped and for several moments, we, together with tourists from around the world, stared in awe at this wonder of nature.

But then the boat started to move again and we were drawn back to a different world, where strange questions about the origin of a name lead some people to see Jews everywhere. While most of the world refers to the main river that the Rio Negro joins as simply “the Amazon,” locals call the part of the Amazon upstream of the meeting point the Solimões River. The commonly accepted explanation for that name is that it is a corruption of the name of an Aborigine nation, the Soriman, which became Solimao and Soliemoens. A more imaginative explanation is that the name is from Shlomo Hamelech — and that his fleets had actually reached the upper regions of the Amazon. A “proof” of this theory is brought from I Kings 10:22, which states: “For the king had at sea a ship of Tarshish with a ship of Hiram: once in three years the ship of Tarshish came, bringing gold, and silver, and ivory, and apes and peacocks.” Traditional commentators have these boats sailing to Spain, Africa, maybe even India. More creative minds see it as a reference to Shlomo Hamelech’s ships reaching the Amazon — and surmise that perhaps some Jews were left behind, becoming the earliest Jewish settlers of the region.

The theory sounds interesting — especially if you’re standing at the very source of it — but we tend to accept the conventional claim that the earliest Jews to reach the Amazon arrived in the early 19th century.

to spend a Shabbos with them, but we did hear about the Friday night davening that attracts 120 people, the Shabbat morning service, and even the Thursday morning minyan. All davening is led by Dr. Dahan, who has been the *chazzan* for decades. In years past, because many small Jewish communities did not have a rabbi, the concept of a reverend — a knowledgeable *baal tefillah* and teacher — came into existence. In some places he functioned as the person to do a bris or perform a wedding. That seems to be the position of Dr. Dahan.

He explained to us that he was born in a tiny village on the river, where his family and three others were the only Jews. His father sold Brazil nuts on the river. He has been in Manaus now for 45 years and is a pillar of its Jewish community.

Dr. Dahan was kind enough to show us around Manuas, focusing on the Jewish sites. It is a city bursting with tropical fruits and fresh fish on one hand, and underprivileged paupers in the streets on the other. Ari G. got himself a cheap haircut by a barber who set up shop on a plastic chair on the sidewalk. While driving through town, we discussed with Dr. Dahan the state of the Jewish community. He was proud of their traditions, and despite not having a rabbi for the last 30-plus years, he related that they have followed the Torah of their forefathers — he is the *chazzan*, and when the need arises, they know

how to perform funerals and weddings. When we asked him what happens if they have a question for a rabbi, he said they can call one in Belém, and if that is not enough, they call a rabbi in São Paolo.

There are numerous communal activities, including a joint second Seder (the first is a family event), and a Chanukah lighting in one of the large shopping malls in Manaus. Brissim are performed by a local doctor who has been doing them for over 40 years. Yet all is not rosy. Although the community built a new *mikveh* three years ago and is currently making plans to build new classrooms, the *kehillah* suffers greatly from intermarriage. Along the Amazon over the years, the Jewish men would sometime take a wife from the non-Jewish women in villages on the river. So today it's possible to find entire hamlets of families with Jewish surnames like Ben Dahan, Ben Lulu, and Ben Shimoul, yet none of them are in fact Jewish.

**Buried Secrets** Graves are always a good source of information about a Jewish community's history, and in addition to the cemeteries in Belém and Manuas, there are hundreds of Jewish graves scattered along the shores of the Amazon. It's a testament to all those Jews who lived in many small villages along the river, in addition to the two main cities. So we were grateful when Dr. Dahan took us to the old cemetery in Manuas, where he explained that the area actually holds two cemeteries side by side: Jewish and Catholic.

We drove through the gates and were surrounded by big Catholic mausoleums, and then wended our way through a thicket of graves adorned with crosses. We eventually reached



Fishing for kashrus. Once we knew it was kosher, the hunt was on for some pirarucu of our own

a plot with a simple headstone topped by a Magen David. The entire tomb was surrounded and covered by a metal fence, with many small stone plaques added over time lining the wall. This was the burial site of the Jewish “saint,” Rabbi Shalom Imanuel Muyal, and the plaques were non-Jewish “thank-you” notes by people who felt that he had performed miracles for them. They were dated right up until last year.

Who was this tzaddik, whose influence is still felt after an entire century? With large numbers of mostly single Jews having made their way up the Amazon in the late 1800s, someone, perhaps a concerned Moroccan mother, decided they needed a spiritual infusion. Rabbi Shalom Imanuel Muyal was dispatched to the region in 1908. He slowly made his way up the river, traversing the 2,000 kilometers from Belém to Manaus. There he confronted the enemies that were ravaging many of the rubber workers — malaria, yellow fever, and hepatitis.

No one yet knew who he was when he too contracted yellow fever; he was just one of many ill people, and no one wanted to tend to his needs. One brave, compassionate soul from within the community cared for him until his passing two years later in 1910. At the time there was not yet a Jewish cemetery, so he was interred smack in the middle of the Christian cemetery. The compassionate woman who had treated him then continued to treat other sick people, mostly non-Jews, many of whom recovered. When these grateful

individuals started crediting her with supernatural powers, she said that all of the credit belonged not to her but to the rabbi, whom she labeled a saint.

From that day on, Christians have been visiting Rabbi Muyal's tomb, praying for miracles and claiming to have been answered. Dr. Dahan is a bit skeptical, though, and told us how the Jewish community first built a fence around the grave, and then a covering over it to try to prevent people from adding those plaques. But, he said, “they just keep getting in.” He explained that to the Jewish community, Rabbi Muyal is simply considered a dedicated rabbi who died many years ago, honored on his *yahrtzeit* (Rosh Chodesh Adar II), and during Aseres Yemei Teshuvah. There have been suggestions to rebury him in Israel, or at least in the Manaus Jewish cemetery, suggestions that were vociferously opposed by the Christians and wisely not carried through by the Jewish community, because as Dr. Dahan explained, such a step might harm relations between the Jewish and non-Jewish residents of the region.

**Kapparah on Your Head** A few hours before leaving the city and heading back to Israel, we visited the Chabad rabbi in another part of the city. It was surprising to us that this traditional Moroccan community for the most part ignores his presence (one of his most successful activities is his series of *shiurim* on the Seven Noachide Laws for non-Jews). We had a wonderful chat with Rabbi Arie Raichman and his adorable *kinderlach*, with whom he converses in Yiddish and with whom we ate a novel delicacy — chocolate pizza. Rabbi Raichman is fluent in English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Portuguese, and Spanish, and is enthusiastic about running programs in the city.

And while the Moroccans might be entrenched in their traditions and feel they can do fine on their own, they're visibly grateful for at least one of Rabbi Raichman's programs — *kapparos*. *Kapparos* was a tradition handed down from their fathers, and the community was determined to perpetuate the tradition. In the absence of a *shochet*, however, they simply killed the chickens. Thanks to Rabbi Raichman, they now are provided with over a hundred live chickens for *kapparos*, and arrangements are made for the *shechitah* too.

Yet is tradition alone enough to sustain this dwindling *kehillah*? When we were in the cemetery, we noticed two large cement plates on the ground. Dr. Dahan said they marked the *genizah*, and naturally we wanted to see the contents. However, after separating the plates and peering in, it became clear that the extreme humidity and rain has caused anything that might have been in there to have decomposed.

While Manaus is a tiny but still vibrant community, it seems as if its future is like that of so many of the world's struggling *kehillos* we've visited. The youth have left, many on aliyah. Intermarriage is affecting the remainder. Manaus's glorious past is a testament to the strength and commitment of Am Yisrael through the ages, but its long-term future, like the *genizah*, will have to weather many elements of nature that are working against it. ●