



Melaveh Malka table in the *beis avel*, just five minutes from our hotel



Dr. Ari Greenspan learns the process of *klaf* production in a rural Ethiopian village



Entrance into the weavers workshop in the Jewish compound, run by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ)

The Unexpected Gift of Shabbos in Addis Ababa

As part of a multinational halachic tour that included Bahrain (Mishpacha #279) and Eritrea (Mishpacha #290), we had planned on spending Shabbos in the Ethiopian highlands region of Gondar, the area from which the Beta Yisrael Jews hail. Our low expectations (a dingy hotel room; davening alone; wine, matzoh for lechem mishneh, salami schlepped from Israel, and fruit from the local market) were transformed into one of the most meaningful Shabbosim we've experienced in a long time. And not in Gondar, but in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa

Ari Greenspan and Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Addis Ababa is a sprawling, dirty, African city. It is by far the largest city in Ethiopia, with a population of well over three million. Within Africa, Addis Ababa is considered a developed and important city: it is the seat of the headquarters of the African Union (the successor to the Organization of African Unity), and is thus often referred to as “the capital of Africa.”

Despite this relative prestige, it's hard for the Western mind to grasp the poverty afflicting the city.

Everywhere you go, there are people sitting and begging. When your car stops at a light, especially if you are white, an indigent person will immediately stick his hands into the car asking for money, often indicating with his hands and mouth that he is hungry. Blind people and individuals without legs and arms abound, and diseases that in the West are treated at the earliest stage are left untreated here, causing terrible

deformities. It is heartbreaking.

Driving through the city early in the morning, one sees the homeless masses still sleeping on the streets. The wealthier neighborhoods are all enclosed compounds, and every private homeowner, as is found in other parts of Africa, has a guard at night. The guards are armed with no more than sticks, and are there mostly to ward off robbers.

It is important to note, however, that despite this abject poverty and human suffering, one never has a sense of impending personal harm. There is no fear of being attacked or robbed. These people are indeed suffering and poor, but they maintain their dignity. Paradoxically, the inhabitants of the “poorer” countryside and rural villages seem to have a much higher quality of life. There, no one begs and nobody is forced to sleep on the street. Each family takes care of its own.

When we visited Addis Ababa a few times in the 1980s to help the Ethiopian Jews, the government was an extreme, repressive

Marxist regime. Since then, numerous insurgencies and rebellions have come and gone, and peace finally reigns in Ethiopia. Because of the stability, there are now parts of Addis that are truly aspiring to be modern. There are cafes, cell phones, and computer stores, right alongside people selling little sticks for toothbrushes, and donkeys and cattle being herded in the road.

What we especially noticed on this trip was the smog. There are few new cars; most existing automobiles are communist-era, Soviet-made Ladas that spew gray smoke. And the infrastructure still has a long way to go, to put it mildly. Open sewers and drainage channels all over the city pose a true hazard of *bor b'rshus harabbim* (the Gemara's term for an open pit on public property).

Road signs and traffic signals are inadequate, and there are long-term electrical blackouts almost daily. The residents of the more well-to-do neighborhoods all have individual generators. During our Shabbos in Addis Ababa, the usual blackout left us



The Ethiopian highlands with the traditional *tukel* hut dwellings: what would our Shabbos look like?

Photography: Dr. Ari Greenspan and Dr. Ari Zivotofsky



Preparing for Israel: learning Hebrew in a classroom in the NACOEJ compound



Lost heritage: rotted seforim of the old genizah in Addis Ababa



The mikveh in Gondar, with the brachah said before immersion written in Hebrew and Amharic



The traditional Ethiopian loom is used to weave a tallis

in the dark for Seudah Shlishis, until after Shabbos when our hosts were able to fire up their generator.

Catching Up with an Old Friend in Addis Ababa Our previous stop had been Bahrain, where we had gone to explore the roots and current state of its Jewish community. Owing to the vagaries of African air travel (which resulted in our spending a sleepless Thursday night on the floor of the Dubai airport), and to our flight from Addis Ababa to Gondar being cancelled, it was clear that we'd never make it to Gondar before Shabbos.

We booked a hotel in Addis Ababa. Having planned on visiting the Addis Ababa shul and exploring its history, we had been in touch with members of the city's Jewish community before embarking on the trip, and now we went straight to visit Mr. Kanzen, the current president of the community, whom we've known for a few years.

He was born in Aden in southern Yemen, and moved to Addis in 1940 as a boy. He was gracious enough to let us use

his Eritrean residence earlier in the week, when we went to visit the shul in Asmara. Realizing that, together with the two of us, there were close to six or seven traditional Jews in town, we asked him about possibly getting together a minyan, a rare occurrence in the Ethiopian capital. We told him that we were prepared to make the hour-plus walk to the shul from our hotel.

We were shocked when he told us that not that only would there be a Shabbos morning minyan, but there would be minyanim for all of the Shabbos services.

In recent years, the Adenite Jews living in Israel have established an organization to preserve their unique customs, and many of these have been preserved in the sefer *Nachalat Yosef*

And furthermore, there had been minyanim twice a day for the entire week, because one of the Israelis working there was sitting *shivah*. However, this minyan would not be in the shul but in the *beis avel*, house of the mourner, a mere five-minute walk from our hotel. And to make things even better, there would be three communal, kosher Shabbos meals.

A Missed Flight Leads to a Shabbos Not to Be Missed The *tefillot* and meals turned out to be not only good, but truly inspirational, and this was due in a large part to the unusual cast of characters that showed up. What sorts of Jews end up in Addis? Aside from Mr. Kanzen and Mr. Felix, who live there, the only other person we knew who would be there was a Mr. Shalom Sion, who resides in England, but was there for business. He was the reason that there was kosher chicken for the Shabbos meals: he is trained as a *shochet*, and brought his *shechitah* knife with him.

Talk about a small world: we had originally met Sion over twenty years before on a previous trip to Ethiopia, and he still had our names written in his address book. He comes to Addis a number of times a year, and is an active member of the tiny but cohesive Adenite community there. Aside from being the *shochet*, he also served as the "official" Torah reader that Shabbos. In the Adenite tradition, which is similar to the Yemenite custom, each person called up for an *aliyah* not only recites the brachos but also reads his own *aliyah* from the *sefer Torah*.

That Shabbos, because it was understood that not everyone was able to read the Torah properly, Shalom Sion read for those who could not read it themselves. But he did not have to read for any of the Adenites. Even the least religious among them read the Torah on his own, in the unique Adenite tune and pronunciation. In recent years, the Adenite Jews living in Israel have established an organization to preserve their unique customs, and many

Road signs and traffic signals are inadequate, and there are long-term electrical blackouts almost daily. The residents of the more well-to-do neighborhoods all have individual generators

of these have been preserved in the sefer *Nachalat Yosef*.

Sion's background is also interesting. His maternal grandfather was the chief rabbi of the Adenite community in the tiny African country of Djibouti, which is sandwiched on the Red Sea coast between Ethiopia and Somalia. The *kehillah* there was vibrant until the Jews all left around the time of the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

He moved to Israel along with the rest of the Djibouti community, in 1948, but told us that he was immediately flown to Aden, where large transit camps had been set up to bring the Jews of Yemen to Israel en masse. He spent a year living in terrible conditions, helping with the large *aliyah* of the entire Yemenite community. Shalom Sion's family then moved to Addis, where he grew up.

The Addis Ababa Shul Succat Rahamim, the shul in Addis Ababa from which the *sifrei Torah* for our Shabbos were borrowed, is particularly interesting. It was built about 100 years ago by the Benin family, like many of the shuls in East Africa. However, unlike many of them, it was not originally built as a shul, but as part of a large compound called Safari Benin, which means Benin's Land.

The building is a two-story structure with the shul on the second floor. It has unusually thick walls that contain deep recesses. We were told that this was originally the cash room for the Benin business. There were no banks in those days, and there was a need for a strong,

easily defended structure to hold silver and gold, and this second-story room — the safes in the deep wall recesses — was perfect. Many years ago it was converted into a shul, the door moved from one side to the other; now, like many Sephardic shuls, it is a big, open, square room with benches along the outer walls and a raised *bimah* in the center. It contains a small *ezras nashim*, in the form of a room with a window adjacent to the main room.

The street the shul is on still goes by the name Bnei Sefer. This street has also been home to some interesting neighbors. It seems Mr. Benin was unhappy with the local workers, and brought over some Muslims from Yemen to build for him, and he actually built a small mosque for them on the same street as the shul. Over the last century, the Muslim population has grown dramatically; today, almost one-third of traditionally Coptic Ethiopia is Muslim. A Saudi prince recently donated money for a massive central mosque of Ethiopia, to be built on Mr. Benin's land. It is called "Benin's Mosque," probably the only mosque in the world named after a Jew.



Dr. Ari Zivotofsky in the courtyard of the Jewish school in Gondar: "Here we discovered the Jews of Aden"

An Astounding 3d Animated Presentation of The Bais Hamikdash

An Ideal Learning Experience for the Entire Family

Great Gift Idea!

Highly Recommended by
Rabbonim & Mechanchim/os

WITH ENGLISH OR YIDDISH NARRATION

To view a 3 minute demo – or to order direct – visit us at:

www.BaisHamikdashLive.com

**והראנו בבנינו
ושמחנו בתקונו**

This unprecedented, 75 minute feature presentation of the Bais Hamikdash guides its viewers through its history and hashkafah while "walking" them through the entire Bais Hamikdash complex, in a way that has never been done before. The narration is informative and inspiring; the music is rich and moving, while the lifelike images – fully animated 3-D computer rendered models – are breathtakingly beautiful.

Available at better Judaica stores

Now Available on DVD

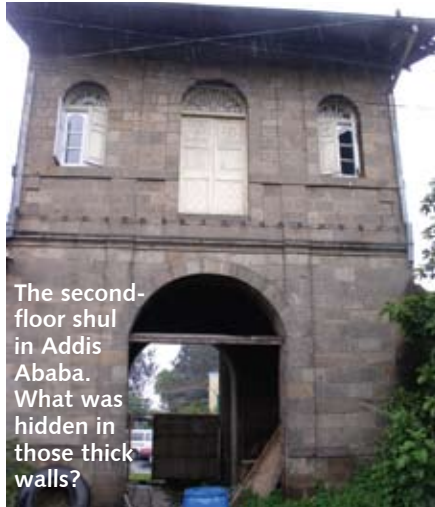
Several of the other people in attendance were also members of the Adenite community. Mr. Felix is in the meat trade, owns supermarkets there, and lives in Addis full time, and he has a son who served in an elite Israeli military unit. A special treat was meeting Mr. Kanzen's brother, who neither lives nor does business in Ethiopia, but happened to be visiting from Manchester, England.

The Exotic Letters of the Yemenite Sifrei Torah In 1987, we had traveled to Ethiopia as part of a mission to help the Beta Israel Jews in the mountains of Gondar province. It was during the difficult period between the two miraculous airlifts of Operation Moses in 1984-5 and the dramatic thirty-six-hour Operation Solomon in 1991. That trip was the first of many to Ethiopia, and that was when we first "discovered" the Adenites, Jews from the southern Yemenite port of Aden, who had begun establishing satellite communities in the late nineteenth century. In 1987, there was no *shochet* in Addis, and we *shechted* for them.

When we had gone into the shul, we asked if we could see the *sifrei Torah*. One Torah scroll in particular stood out, as it was clearly very old and written on gazelle skin. At the time, Mr. Kanzen told us that it was 400 years old and had been brought over from Aden. It was a rich, dark-brown color, and of course the *ksav* was Sephardic in style.

The "paragraph breaks," known in the Torah as *ptuchah* and *stumah*, were laid out as dictated by the Rambam. All of our *sifrei Torah* are written in such a way as to conform to the two major opinions about the definition of a *ptuchah* and *stumah*. But here, there was no trying to fulfill all opinions; it was written unabashedly to fulfill only the opinion of the Rambam, something not often seen today.

As we started going through the Torah, we got to the story of Yosef and Potifar, and a few letters jumped out at us. We saw a strange-looking letter *peh* that we had never seen before. The inside of a normal *peh* is an upside-down *vav* (see picture); however, this *peh* had a curly-q inside of it (see picture). We had heard that there were ancient traditions among *sofrim* that certain letters in a *sefer Torah* were written with



PROTECTING A FELLOW JEW

In 1946, Yitzchak Shamir (then the Lechi chief of operations, as well as a future prime minister of the State of Israel) was arrested by the British following the Lechi's bombing of the British command center in Jerusalem, the King David Hotel.

Shamir was deported, along with 400 other Jews, to a prison in Asmara, Eritrea. He managed to escape and made his way to Addis Ababa, where the Jewish community and a Mr. Shalom Shalamei fed and hid him. Shalom Shalamei, the old Adenite *gabbai* for whom we *shechted* chickens in 1987, hid him among the coffee sacks stored in the room below the shul, just off the inner courtyard, where in years past the community did their *shechitah*. Shamir escaped to Djibouti, then a French colony; the French refused to hand him over to the British.

As a commander of the Lechi, one of the more militantly anti-British groups in Eretz Yisrael, there was concern that the British would kidnap Shamir from Djibouti, so the local government hid him on a French-controlled island opposite Somalia, where he was protected from the British. All of this was related to us by Mr. Shalom Sion's uncle, whom we met after our return to Israel. In 1946 he was in his twenties, and he regularly visited Shamir and provided him with kosher food.

"*osiyos meshunos*," strange-looking letters, in the language of the Rishonim. This type of *peh* in particular was a common one, and was referred to as a "*peh lafuf*" or a "coiled *peh*."

What makes this even more remarkable is that according to the laws of *sofrus*, scribal arts, this would not be a kosher letter, and should in theory invalidate the entire *sefer Torah*. But the ancient traditions of writing some unusual letters in specific locations in the text, according to some, date back to the giving of the Torah itself.

We always remembered this unique Torah. It once accompanied a group of Ethiopian Jews on their flight to Israel, and strangely enough found its way back to Ethiopia, but into the hands of a Christian missionary group that claimed to be Jewish. Mr. Kanzen realized that it would be lost forever if he did not do something, so he got some policemen together and literally crashed a jeep through the missionary compound's gates to take the Torah back to the shul.

While we were in Asmara, Eritrea — Ethiopia's former northern province and now an independent country — we wondered if we might find similar *pehs* in the old Torah scrolls there, as they too had been brought from Aden during the same period. We started rolling the Torah open, and somehow we remembered in which *pasuk* we had seen the *peh* in 1987 in Addis. We rolled to *Parshas Mikeitz*, but were disappointed to see that it was only a regular *peh*.

Or so we thought. When we took a closer look, we realized that, to our surprise, the same *pehs* that were curly in the Addis Torah, had smudge marks in this Asmara Torah. Someone had "corrected" this Torah! Clearly this had been one of those unique Torahs from Aden that had curly *pehs*. But somebody who had never seen or heard of such letters had obviously thought they weren't kosher, and as such erased them and "corrected" them as regular letters. This little bit of halachic detective work just emphasizes how fragile some of our unique traditions are, and how important it is to try to safeguard them.

During that same trip in 1987, we asked the *gabbai*, Mr. Shalom Shalamei, if there was a *genizah* that the community kept. He took us to the entrance of the shul

One Torah scroll in particular stood out, as it was clearly very old and written on gazelle skin. At the time, Mr. Kanzen told us that it was 400 years old and had been brought over from Aden. It was a rich dark-brown color, and of course the ksav was Sephardic in style

and opened a closet for us, full of very old seforim. In the five minutes we had, he let us each take an old sefer, and we picked up two that were on top of the pile. One of them was from the 1720s. All these years we have wondered what other treasures we might find in this *genizah*. Clearly these were seforim that came over with the early Adenites from Yemen at the turn of the twentieth century, or that they had acquired during the years when it was a more active community, in the early and mid-twentieth century.

When Ari Greenspan returned to Addis Ababa for Yom Kippur in 2007, nobody left in Addis even knew there was such a *genizah*, and when he pointed out the door, no one knew where the key was anymore. Finally, on this visit, we decided to get permission to break down the metal door and see the treasures.

We got a locksmith who drilled out the old lock and replaced it with a new one, and we waited with bated breath to see the large pile of seforim that we remembered from nearly a quarter of a century earlier. Imagine our sadness and disappointment when we found a room full of old books rotting from rain and water damage. Imagine how many other precious bits of Judaica have vanished over the centuries due to similar calamities.

The Israeli Coffee Trader of the Jungle Also joining us in the minyan and Shabbos meals in Addis were Israelis working and living in Ethiopia. One of the most colorful of these characters was Tamir Chamami, half-Yemenite and half-Syrian, who specializes in coffee and spices, and has done business throughout the jungles of Central Africa for the last thirteen years. Tamir's Kiryat Sefer apartment is adjacent to our partner in the production of

techeiles. Tamir speaks fluent Arabic, and finds himself in places that don't exactly appear in a tour company's brochures. He feels as comfortable in Bnei Brak as he does trading with the Saudis. He led the lively *zmilos* during all the meals, and also shared with us his vivid tale of how he gained spiritual strength at a crisis point in his life.

He grew up in Jerusalem's Bayit Vegan neighborhood and studied in the neighborhood's Kol Torah yeshiva, in Chabad yeshivos in Tzfas and Crown Heights, and served three years in the Army. He was at a crossroads in his life when he encountered deep religious experiences in the Mearas HaMachpeilah and in Uman, and also witnessed a medical miracle for his daughter. He is a *leibedig* speaker and singer, and more importantly had the ability to connect with the nonreligious people who were present. The *ruchniyus*, spirituality, at the meals was astounding.

Another Israeli businessman was in Addis to set up fish farms, something he has been successful doing off the coast of Ashkelon. Another recently arrived Israeli was there on a three-year contract to run a gas company. His wife and children would be arriving soon, and his son will celebrate his bar mitzvah in Addis. They both gave up good jobs in Israel for the exciting opportunity to live for a while in Africa.

On the other hand, we met another Israeli who's in Ethiopia for the long haul, though his wife and four children have returned to Israel. For him, living here fulfills his lifelong dream of living amid the excitement of the African wildness.

There was one intact Israeli couple with two little children, and a very traditional French family with three children. He is the financial advisor to the Minister of Finance in Ethiopia, a position he has had in many small countries in Africa.

Our host, who was in mourning, had his son visiting.

And last but not least, Ari Greenspan's sister-in-law Ivy Dash, who has been running an orphanage in Addis for the last two years, joined us along with her locally adopted baby.

One thing that struck us so powerfully was the sense of mutual respect among our group, despite the great diversity of backgrounds and levels of observance. The host, who keeps kosher but is not fully observant, got up and announced at the beginning of the Friday night meal that, to make everyone comfortable, he had purchased new dishes for the meals. When the *zimun* with a minyan was explained by Tamir, everyone was excited to join in the responses. On the other hand, when a cell phone went



The 400-year-old Yemenite Tora from Addis Ababa with the "*peh lafuf*" (L), and the Torah scroll from Asmara, Eritrea with the "corrected" *Peh* (R)



Dr. Ari Zivotofsky (L) and Mr. Shalom Sion of London (R),
our *ba'al korei* and *shochet* for Shabbos

We got a locksmith who drilled out the old lock and replaced it with a new one, and we waited with bated breath to see the large pile of seforim that we remembered from nearly a quarter of a century earlier



Matzos distributed by the AJDC in the early 1980's: keeping traditions alive

off during Shabbos davening, nobody commented — tacit understanding of how much tolerance is necessary to help bring others back to Torah Judaism. All of this occurred during the Three Weeks, and this gave us optimism regarding the relationship of the diverse populations within Am Yisrael. Let us hope this will herald the coming of the Mashiach, *bimheirah b'yameinu*, speedily in our days, Amen! ■

Dr. Ari Greenspan is a Dentist in Yerushalayim 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 chevrutot for 25 years and have been going on halachic adventures around the globe to discover and record Jewish traditions. they can be reached via their website, which includes other articles and material. <http://halachicadventures.com>