

# HAVE KNIFE, WILL TRAVEL

## ARI & ARI'S SHECHITAH TRIP TO EAST AFRICA

*When our resident wandering Jews, Ari and Ari, recently entered the El Al lounge at Ben-Gurion Airport, two **Mishpacha** readers spotted them: “So, are you guys going on another halachic adventure?” they asked. And indeed, that’s exactly where the two Aris were headed. But even they weren’t quite prepared for what they’d find on this latest excursion into the wilds of Africa*

Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan

It all started with an innocent interest in doing *kaparos* the real way. We were both eighteen-year-olds learning in Yeshivat Har Etzion, and as Yom Kippur approached, Ari Z. showed up in yeshivah one day with two chickens. After he performed *kaparos*, about forty fellows stayed around to watch a *shochet shecht* the birds. Once he was done, the crowd dwindled to three, including the two of us.

As we observed the *shochet* clean and pluck the chicken, he asked us why we don’t learn to *shecht*. The notion that we, American teenagers, could actually learn *shechitah* hit us like a lightning bolt; after all, wasn’t *shechting* the exclusive domain of old men with white beards? He mentioned the name Rav Sasson Graidí, a Yemenite who was then the chief Sephardic *shochet* of Yerushalayim, and told us how to contact him.

We accepted this challenge, and it ended up changing our lives. We spent many months learning the relevant parts of *Yoreh Dei’ah*, and traveled into Yerushalayim late at night twice a week, sleeping at the home of Ari Z.’s grandparents in French Hill so we could rise at the crack of dawn and scramble down the side of a mountain for the ten-minute walk to the city’s main slaughterhouse. But in addition to enabling us to learn how to *shecht*, this experience gave us our first real exposure to a whole spectrum of different types of Jews: serious *talmidei chachamim*, old European Yidden, *bubbys* who taught us how to *kasher*, and Yemenite Jews. It was our encounter with this last group that probably sparked our interest in exploring diverse, far-flung Jewish communities, halachah, and *mesoret Yisrael*.

Far from home, where the deer and the chickens roam... at least until Ari and Ari got there



**The Stopover** We began our study of *shechitah* with the intention of using our newly acquired skills on behalf of other Jews who needed them, and indeed, we’ve been privileged to do so on many occasions. About twenty-five years ago, following a two-week trip to Ethiopia, we had briefly visited Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, and did a bit of *shechting* for the Jewish community. Today, on our return trip, we found that fewer than a dozen of the original families that started the Jewish community are left, and most of Nairobi’s Jews are relatively recent arrivals from Israel. Some Israelis are there on a short-term basis as medical, economic, or agricultural advisors, while others are more permanent residents in a variety of businesses including flowers, jewels, and energy.

The original families, together with the Israelis and a smattering of other Jews, have succeeded in maintaining an active Orthodox shul. And that’s where we come in. The shul’s kitchen is kosher, as are several of the kitchens in members’ homes. Until two years ago, much of the kosher meat was imported from either South Africa or Israel. But then, the community decided that they would prefer to have local *shechitah* and began flying in Rabbi Desmond Maizels of Cape Town about twice a year to *shecht* for them. By January 2011, the entire supply of kosher meat had been used up and Rabbi Maizels was unavailable, so we agreed to go to Kenya to *shecht*.

Since there are no direct flights from Israel to Nairobi, we flew in to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, early one Monday morning. After briefly visiting Ari G.’s sister-in-law, we made our way for the main Addis abattoir. There were large placards identifying different areas as the “Muslim Slaughter Hall” and the “Christian Slaughter Hall.” There is no kosher slaughter in Addis — although on our return there the following week, we’d be aiming to change all that. Who knows? Maybe one day there will be a sign that says “Jewish Slaughter Hall.”

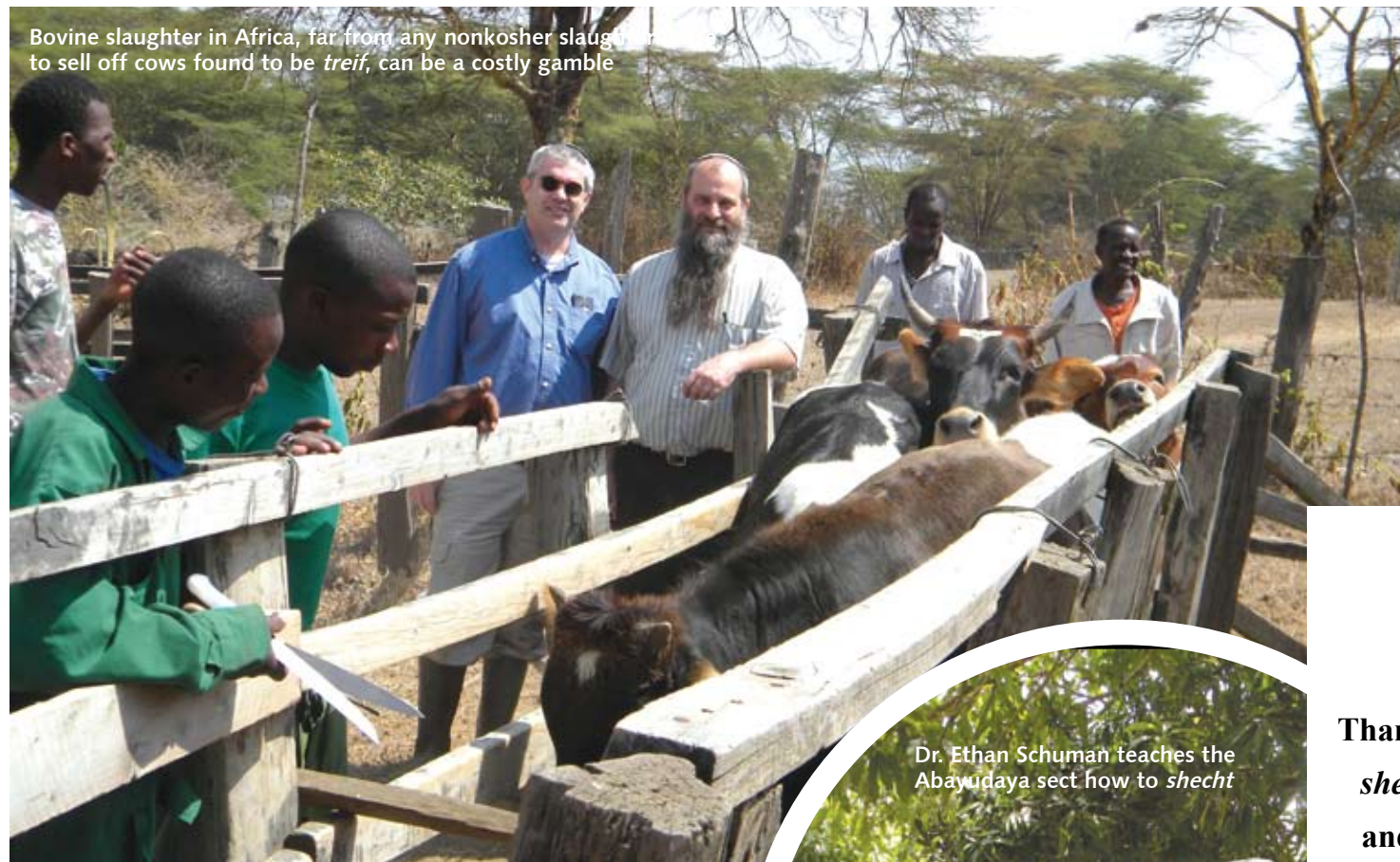
We quickly found the slaughterhouse director and explained that we were looking for ink that could be used on meat. We’d had a stamper specially made so that we could label the kosher meat that we planned to slaughter in Kenya, but were unable to find suitable ink before we left Israel. Apparently unaware that every slaughterhouse in the world uses virtually the same ink, the director hesitated because, he said, it was a secret formula and he was concerned that we would reverse-engineer the ink to discover its ingredients and production process. After “schmoozing him up” a bit, he agreed to give us a small vial of ink. Unfortunately, it came with a poorly fitting cap, which is why samples of this ink can now be found in many sections of passport control in the Addis Ababa airport. And, finally, it was off to Kenya.

### DAY ONE: Arrival in Nairobi

On arrival in Kenya, we met up with fellow *shochet* Dr. Ethan Schuman of St. Louis (whom **Mishpacha** readers may recall from our recent trip to Cuba — Issue #342), who had flown in to join us on our halachic adventure. Having traveled through the night, we were quite tired, but immediately went to work *shechting* the first of six species, Muscovy duck.

Actually, it was this duck that “earned” us our trip. The kosher status of this New World species of duck has been the subject of controversy, and while accepted as kosher in

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Bovine slaughter in Africa, far from any nonkosher slaughter, can be a costly gamble to sell off cows found to be *treif*.



Dr. Ethan Schuman teaches the Abayudaya sect how to *shecht*

Israel, is treated as questionable in the US. When Rabbi Maizels hesitated about *shechting* Muscovy duck, Channa Commanday, the member of the Nairobi Hebrew Congregation (NHC) who was coordinating this trip, began researching its kosher status, came upon our names, and eventually invited us in. Thankfully, we flawlessly *shechted* thirty ducks, and while some of the local workers began to remove the feathers, we went in to rest. It wasn’t long, however, before we were told that our services were needed for ten more ducks that had just arrived.

Although normally one brachah can be recited before many consecutive acts of *shechitah*, after the first group of thirty had been finished, we had assumed there would be no more *shechting* to be done, thus necessitating a new brachah for the new arrivals. This was the first of several interesting halachic questions that arose during the trip.

### DAY TWO: Shechitah, Shechitah, and More Shechitah

The next day was to be our big *shechitah* day, with 800 chickens scheduled to arrive at 6:30 a.m. The three of us davened in the beautiful Nairobi synagogue, and by the time we had finished, the chickens, along with fifty local workers assisting us, were on-site. Lacking the infrastructure of a conventional slaughterhouse, this was to be an ad hoc operation. One section of the synagogue grounds was converted into the *shechitah* area, where we had our knives and sharpening stones, and where those who would be assisting us in holding the birds were stationed. From there, the freshly *shechted* chickens were transferred to

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groups of workers sitting on the lawn plucking the feathers. The defeathered birds were then brought to yet another area where they were opened, cleaned, and prepared for *kashering*.

Owing to a perpetual shortage of water and low water pressure in Nairobi, huge tanks of collected rainwater were utilized to fill the drums into which the chickens were placed for soaking. Rabbi Maizels had warned us to make sure ahead of time that there would be an ample supply of salt. “This is Africa, boys,” he’d said, “and it takes a week for salt to arrive from Mombasa by donkey.”

The salt had in fact arrived, but we faced a halachic dilemma when we saw the size of the salt chunks. The halachah requires using grains of salt (known in US supermarkets as “kosher salt”) that are not so large that they fall off the meat and not so small that they quickly dissolve. The large salt blocks that we were presented with were too big to remain in place on top of the birds, and so we put two men to work with a shovel and hammer to crush the salt into smaller pieces, making it suitable for *kashering*



Ari and Ari near the four-seater plane that would transport them back to Nairobi after a day *shechting* in the countryside

use. Salting of meat needs to be done either on a grate or on a slanted surface, so the blood can drain off. We were greeted with the old shul gates with a Magen David still welded onto them, which were used as the *kashering* racks. This entire procedure (which included *kashering* the ducks from the previous day) went on for more than fifteen hours — well into the night.

The *shechitah* itself was finished by late morning, and while the *kashering* was taking place, we were introduced to one of the town’s more religiously committed Israelis, who owns a large flower growing and exporting business. He drove us out to his plantation, stopping on the way at the new super-modern, Israeli-owned mall, Westgate, to pick up coffee from the Israeli-owned coffee shop. When we arrived at his place, we found twenty-eight sheep and five cows waiting for us. We began processing them, but realized that, without the proper equipment, it would take the workers quite some time to restrain all the animals, so one of us returned immediately to the shul to supervise the completion of the bird *kashering*, while the other two remained behind to *shecht* the animals. We were doing our best to “meet” their needs. Rabbi Maizels happened to be passing through Nairobi on a trip to supervise production at a coconut-oil plant, and he joined us that evening for a barbecue, at which we enjoyed some of our freshly *shechted* meats, and he regaled us with his wealth of experience and stories of his unique halachic adventures in Africa.

### DAY THREE: Why There Are No Gates Around the Cemetery

Our plans called for a midday flight to Entebbe, Uganda, and when the community asked how we wanted to spend the morning, we requested a personal tour of the community’s cemetery. It was conducted by Charles Szlapak, chairman of the famed Fairview Hotel, which is adjacent to the Israeli Embassy, and a senior member of the Jewish community, having come to Kenya with his parents in 1937 when he was five years old.

We entered the cemetery through what appeared to be an opening in the stone wall. Mr. Szlapak explained to us that they



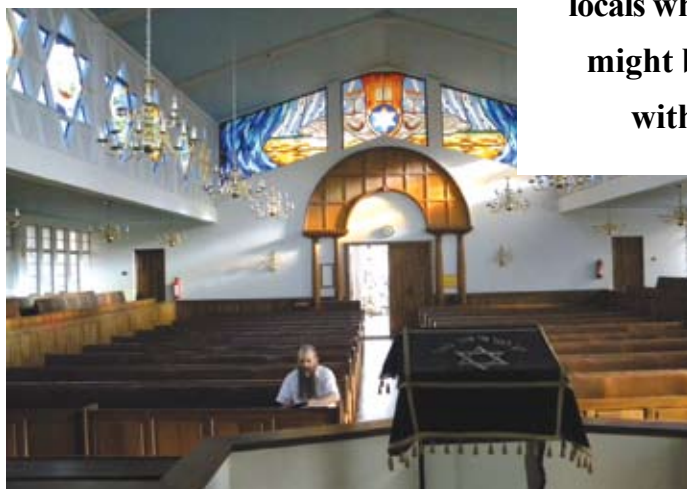
had problems with theft: the gates had been stolen, the roof tiles of the cemetery building were missing, and he showed us a recently smashed tombstone. But this was not due to anti-Semitism, as the neighboring Christian cemetery suffered the same fate from the drunks that frequented the neighboring park. Some of the graves had even been dug up by locals who thought Jews might bury valuables with their dead.

All told, there are five Jewish cemeteries in Kenya, and the NHC does its best to maintain them. There are two in Nairobi — the one we visited, and an older, full one on the main Mombasa road that the driver took us to on the way to the airport — and one each in Mombasa, Nakuru, and Kitale. There are also Jewish graves in the Nairobi War Graves Cemetery.

#### DAY FOUR: We Hop Over to Uganda

After arriving in Uganda, we traveled to a small village called Putti, located about six hours from the Entebbe airport, to visit the Abayudaya tribe. These villagers recognize that they are not halachically Jewish, but pine for the day when they will be able to undergo a real halachic conversion. As part of the process, they are eager to learn anything and everything they can about traditional Jewish practice. When they heard we were coming to visit, they requested that we bring *shechitah* equipment and show them what kosher slaughter entails. We gave them a lesson in the properties of a *chalif* (*shechitah* knife) and how to sharpen it, and then demonstrated *shechitah* on three chickens.

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An eight-acre campus in Nairobi houses a spacious shul (t), and a frame of a large succah at its entrance (b)



#### DAY FIVE: We Don't Even Eat This Well at Home

We returned to Kenya on Erev Shabbos and went straight from the plane to the home of one of Nairobi's leading obstetricians, who happens to be the leading expert on quail in Kenya, and had purchased 250 quail for us to *shecht* before Shabbos. Most

were going to be koshered and frozen for the benefit of her kids, but three of them rounded out the feast that we were preparing for our own *seudas Shabbos*. As Rabbi Maizels mentioned in a text message he sent us on Friday from South Africa, we were probably the only people in the world having a gourmet *seudas Shabbos* that consisted of fresh quail, cow's tongue, and chicken, all under our own *hashgachah*.

#### DAY SIX: An African Shabbos

Our Shabbos accommodations were in the spacious quarters of the Nairobi shul's social hall, known as Vermont Hall, which was initially constructed in 1938. Davening was in the new shul building, built in 1955 to replace the original structure that dated from the beginning of the century. The walled, eight-acre campus that houses Vermont Hall and the shul also includes a freestanding library that was originally used by the Israeli Hebrew school, as well as the frame of a large succah and a functioning *mikveh*.

In earlier years, Nairobi was not the only city with a congregation and synagogue building. In 1938, there were about forty-five Jewish families in the Nakuru region of Kenya. In 1955, a synagogue was constructed in Nakuru, with the foundation stone laid by the Jewish mayor of the city. However, after wartime, when restrictions prohibiting any Germans (including Jews) from living in Nairobi were lifted, many of Nakuru's Jews moved to Nairobi, and by 1962 the number of Jewish families in Nakuru had dwindled to fourteen. The recently built shul was sold, and

the building, with the Magen David still showing, now houses an orphanage.

Another unusual shul that existed for a short time in Kenya was located in the Gilgal Detention Camp, where the British imprisoned many of the hundreds of Jewish freedom fighters they had exiled from what was then Mandate Palestine. These prisoners built a synagogue, and NHC archives record that the Nairobi community provided them with matzoh, wine, food, and other necessities. Nairobi's Jews also befriended the imprisoned Jews, despite running the risk of appearing unpatriotic to the colonial government.

Today the Nairobi synagogue is the only shul between Zambia and Ethiopia, and often hosts a variety of travelers and temporary residents involved in humanitarian projects.

We spotted two such people in shul on Friday night, a father and daughter visiting from Australia. We invited them to our sumptuous dinner, but found that Charles Szlapak had beaten us to it and had invited them to become one of his many Shabbos guests. Mr. Szlapak discouraged us from walking over to his house after our *leil Shabbos seudah* due to safety concerns.

## Kenya's Jewish History

It is likely that the first Jew in what is now known as Kenya was Mr. J. Marcus, who arrived in 1899. At the time, Nairobi was nothing but a swampy plain that had been chosen as railhead for the Uganda Railway, then under construction. Michael Hertz doubled the Jewish population when he arrived in 1901, and 1903 saw a big influx of nine more Jews due to the "Uganda Programme" under which that region of Kenya was to be given to the Zionists as a Jewish state.

In 1904 the local Jews organized into a community, the Nairobi Hebrew Congregation (NHC), and in 1907, twelve of these pioneers met to plan the construction of a shul building. The cornerstone was laid in 1912 by the governor in the presence of all thirty Kenyan Jews, and a modest wooden shul was built. The community continued to grow, hosting its first wedding in 1907, and the membership had risen to eighty by 1930. The grounds of the synagogue have since been enveloped by the burgeoning city of Nairobi. The large, manicured grounds and gardens are an island of serenity in this traffic-clogged city.

The early Jewish settlers, while laying the foundations of a Jewish community, were not particularly interested in religion and, thus, religious life was minimal. There was no rabbi for a long time, and the first reverend was not hired until 1917, staying a mere four years. He was followed by others who came and went. But with the rise of Nazism, the character of the Nairobi Jewish community changed dramatically. European Jews sought any safe haven, and that included Kenya. The local Jews organized to help settle the refugees quickly into the community, and religious life increased thanks to this influx.

Life in Kenya dramatically changed during the Mau Mau Rebellion and the state of emergency that existed from 1952 to 1959, and again when Kenya achieved independence in 1963. Just before this period, the NHC had peaked at about 180 members. But white Kenyans feared a bloodbath would follow independence, and when it was declared, there was such a large exodus of Jews that the congregations in the cities of Mombasa and Kitale-Eldoret closed entirely.

At the same time, however, Kenyan independence brought a new influx of Jews — Israelis who came in advisory and business capacities. Formal ties between the new country and Israel were established when then-foreign minister Golda Meir visited and the Israeli Embassy was opened in 1964 at the same site where it is today, just across a small road from the Fairview Hotel. Following the Yom Kippur War, Kenya, following the lead of the Organization of African Unity, severed ties with Israel, but as soon as the ban was lifted in 1988, Kenya reestablished diplomatic relations with Israel.



While he seemed concerned with random acts of crime, most people we spoke to indicated that that was no more a problem in Nairobi than in many other big cities around the world.

Islamic terrorism, however, is a concern, and the shul has security guards who check the passports of all visitors. In 1998, the US Embassy in Nairobi was attacked by a car bomb that killed nearly 200 people, and in 2002 a kosher, Israeli-owned hotel near Mombasa was bombed, killing three Israeli guests and several locals. Simultaneous with that bomb attack, two surface-to-air missiles were fired at an Israeli charter plane. They missed, and the plane landed safely at Ben-Gurion Airport about five hours later, escorted by Israeli F-15 fighter jets — but that was the end of direct flights from Tel Aviv to Nairobi.

Along with the *divrei Torah* that we delivered in shul Friday night and Shabbos day, a member of the congregation spoke beautifully about Moshe's absence from that week's *sparshah, Tetzaveh*. Following Musaf, which was said as *hoicha kedushah* (a custom found among some Yemenites as well, based on the Rambam), there was a small *kiddush* at which we announced

**The entrance to the farm is through a national game reserve where, driving through, we passed giraffe, zebra, and all sorts of other classic African wildlife. We had to restrain ourselves from hopping out of our vehicle and *shechting* the giraffe**



Anti-Semitic attacks aren't a problem at the Nairobi cemetery, but drunks and fortune seekers are. (l-r): Ari Z., senior community member Charles Szlapak, Ari G., and Ethan Schuman of St. Louis



Ari Greenspan scours the tiny one-room library on the shul compound

Locals plucking feathers during the 800-chicken *shechitah* marathon

that we would be giving a short *shiur* relating to the Beis HaMikdash.

To our great surprise, the *shiur* was fairly well attended — not by any of the Jews, but only by the ten or so local non-Jewish black Kenyans who have been coming to shul for years. We were amazed and surprised by their enthusiasm, knowledge, and commitment. When we later discussed this with community members, we were told that there are indeed some locals who come to shul regularly and are learning and teaching their children Hebrew and about Judaism. They sincerely want to convert, based on their belief in the truth of the Torah, and several members of the NHC are working with them to arrange for their *geirus*. One of them, not a wealthy person, has a son studying in the local public school, where they recently started praying Christian prayers. He brought a lawsuit, at his own expense, in which he explained that he is raising his child as a Jew and does not want him reciting the prayers of another religion. Another woman we spoke with used to take a twelve-hour bus ride to Uganda weekly to learn Torah with the Abayudaya.

There are not many opportunities in Nairobi for intellectual stimulation in a Jewish context, and when we offered to give a lecture Motzaei Shabbos on synagogues around the world, the community responded warmly. Our PowerPoint presentation was well-attended and almost everyone present had an interesting story to tell.

**DAY SEVEN: Down on the Farm**

Our final day in Kenya promised to be busy and we were up for a 6:30 a.m. start. We headed out to the area of Naivasha, where there is a magnificent farm on which we were to *shecht* turkey. The natural scenery along the winding, two-and-a-half-hour trip was absolutely stunning. After *shechting* the turkeys, our next destination was the farm of Channa Commanday and her

husband, Dr. David Silverstein. David had originally come to Kenya from Chicago as a young cardiologist for a two-year stint, but he stayed on and has served as the *rosh kehillah* of NHC. Several years after Dr. Silverstein moved to Kenya, the then-vice president of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi came to him for a checkup. They hit it off, and Dr. Silverstein has been his personal physician ever since, including during his time as president of Kenya from 1978 to 2002. They continue to enjoy a warm relationship and have a weekly early-morning tea together. Moi seems to like Jewish doctors, and when he needed a cataract operation, he flew to Israel to be seen by a Hadassah doctor who had spent some time in Kenya.

The farm that David and Channa run is amazing. They have a huge vegetable section, several horses, and cows. What makes their farm truly special is its location: it's situated on a kilometer of lakefront property, with hippos and flamingos rising from the water. The entrance to the farm is through a national game reserve where, driving through, we passed giraffe, zebra, and all sorts of other classic African wildlife. We had to restrain ourselves from hopping out of our vehicle and *shechting* the giraffe, because Kenyan wildlife rules are particularly stringent.

We *shechted* several cows for them, although one turned out to be *treif*. We live in a world where huge slaughterhouses simply sell off those animals that are found to be nonkosher. When you own the cow, however, finding it a *treifah* is a huge personal loss. Our day at the farm having ended, we headed back to Nairobi in a private four-seater plane.

Our next and final stop was Ethiopia. When we were last in Ethiopia two years ago to visit the Adenites, we met several Israelis living there who were trying to maintain a semblance of Judaism (see "The Unexpected Gift of Shabbos in Addis Ababa," *Mishpacha* Issue #296). We contacted them before this trip to

ask whether they could use our *shechitah* services, as Pesach is coming, and they jumped at the opportunity. Menashe, our host, picked us up at the airport in Addis, and as he drove to his house, the passing scenes of the dirty, broken Ethiopian streets made Kenya look well developed by comparison. While

Nairobi has a relatively Western, cosmopolitan feel, with modern cars and lots of traffic, the roads of Addis are riddled with many open sewers and structural hazards, and are crowded with beggars sleeping in the streets and collecting money at traffic lights. Addis also has almost nightly power outages, including the night we were there, while we did not experience any in Nairobi. Of course, Nairobi may have too much electricity — while adjusting the position of the kitchen faucet, we were greeted by an electric shock!

The first thing Menashe did was put on a yarmulke and join us for Maariv. He then initiated a wide-ranging Torah conversation that covered everything from the halachos of *gid hanashe* to our favorite characters in Tanach.

How committed are the Jews of Addis to kashrus? One woman explained that her irreligious husband had agreed to keep the house kosher, yet on one occasion she came home to find him barbecuing pork chops in the backyard! He defended himself by arguing that he was doing it out of the house. She held her tongue, but the next day when her husband came home, he found all new dishes and utensils in the kitchen. She explained to him that he had indeed cooked outside, but had used utensils from the kitchen, which she had to toss. Furthermore, she warned, next time he pulled such a stunt it would cost him even more — she would redo the entire kitchen! He has cooperated ever since.

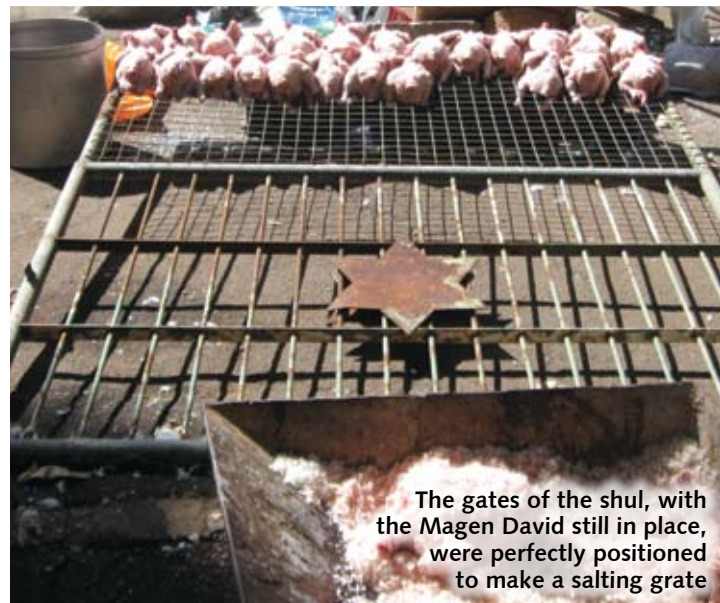
**DAY EIGHT: Out and About in Addis Ababa**

*Shechitah* day in Addis started bright and early as we assembled





If you need to find a way to process kosher chickens far from home, a flower-packing plant is a good place to try. (l-r) Ari and Ari with their host Menashe and his son-in-law.



The gates of the shul, with the Magen David still in place, were perfectly positioned to make a salting grate

several members of the community in a caravan of cars and headed to our designated location. But failure lurked around the corner when it became apparent the order for the 600 chickens had not been confirmed, and the entire consignment had been sold. We then located a small farm that had a supply of chickens, but that too led to disappointment when we explained that the chickens could not be soaked in hot water before plucking the feathers. Following nonkosher slaughter, birds are plunged into hot water to open the pores, which allows the feathers to be easily removed. Halachah prohibits this because it would be tantamount to cooking the meat before it was *kashered*. Interestingly, the community members recalled that the last time a *shochet* came out, he actually permitted doing so; it seems he had learned *hilchos shechitah* but had not covered the next sections of *Yoreh Dei'ah*. Finally we found Genesis Farms, a missionary-run estate that was willing to allow us to *shecht* on our terms. The operation was not particularly well organized, and at one point there was a near-rebellion as the workers flicking the chickens went on strike. Eventually, however, we successfully *shechted* some 400 chickens.

While all this was happening, we were also busy converting a nearby Israeli-owned flower factory into a kosher chicken processing plant. Carmit, an Israeli of Yemenite descent, fondly remembers her grandfather the *shochet* and is trying to live up to his standards. She has been in Ethiopia for seven years and runs a flower-growing operation that exports mostly to Europe. A suggestion: If you ever want to set up a chicken plant — start with a flower-processing facility. The first thing we needed was a better way to remove the feathers. They had an old electric de-leafer lying around that wasn't being used because a few manual whacks are more efficient. It did not have a plug, nor were there outlets available, but after half an hour of connecting the three wires protruding from the machine to random wires hanging from the ceiling, the machine was operational and did a terrific job — that is, until something blew and the machine went dead.

Setting up the salting meant diverting the water used for the flowers — and there was lots of it in the reservoir in the back of the plant — and filling up large flower buckets. And,

since flowers are sorted on slanted metal tables, those made for great surfaces on which to salt the chickens.

Being Sephardim, the women of the community were quite interested in having the dish known in Israel as *me'urav Yerushalmi*, for which they would need to keep the organs such as the heart. One of them also thought she remembered that in Israel chicken hearts were koshered whole, unopened. We had never heard of such a halachic leniency, and it took several calls to a *rav* in Israel to check if there was a different Sephardic or Yemenite position on this, and if there was a difference between chicken and animal hearts, until we all agreed that the hearts must be opened before salting and soaking.

What is amazing is that, despite being irreligious — not even *shomrei Shabbos* — there is something so special about their devotion and interest that is a testament to their Sephardic roots. Here we were in darkest Africa, with two Jewish women who are not part of an active Jewish community, whose husbands eat *treif* out of the house. We were absolutely flabbergasted when one of them turned to us and asked for our help in constructing a *mikveh* for their use. The words she used was “money is not the issue.”

Before the trip, it would have been hard to imagine these Jews of East Africa being interested in anything more than having some kosher meat available to them. Having ventured there, however, we were richly rewarded with meeting Jews with a deep connection to the Jewish People, and a fire in their hearts for Jewish tradition. ■

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