

HORNS AND HORNS IN THE AFRICAN BUSH



We were bumping our way in a Jeep over the wild African terrain, while a daredevil helicopter following us overhead, herding the game into a quarter-mile long blind. We'd never *shechted* antelope before, and this would certainly be an authentic way to feel what it's like to be Jewish in Namibia

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan



We were in South Africa for what were supposed to be a few relatively quiet days — giving a few lectures, visiting some old synagogues, and *shechting* cows and sheep. But as we've already learned time and again, on our halachic adventures, things can turn interesting in unexpected ways. Several hours before Shabbos we heard the phone chirp, indicating an SMS: "Would you like to *shecht* buck in Namibia?" Well, an opportunity like that is irresistible to a pair of halachic adventurers like ourselves, and so Erev Shabbos we were busy booking flights to South Africa's neighboring country.

We got the last two seats on a Sunday morning flight to Windhoek, the capital of Namibia. Formerly known as South West Africa, Namibia gained independence from South Africa in 1990, and is blessed with extensive game and African wildlife. We were being sent by Rabbi Desmond Maizels, a kindred spirit and friend as well as a rabbi in Cape Town who periodically *shechts* for the few Jews in Namibia. He told us that we would have an adventure as well as enjoy the hospitality of the central Jew in town, Zvi Gorelick, and he was correct on both counts.

Jews in Namibia? Zvi Gorelick, our warm and welcoming host, is the man who single-handedly keeps this community going. He told us how the first Jews came to Namibia in the 1880s looking for business opportunities in guano, a widely used fertilizer from the feces of sea birds, bats, and seals, found in great unadulterated quantities off ocean coasts. These Jewish entrepreneurs were given a communal boost when the region came under German rule in 1884: Jewish soldiers numbered among the occupying German army.

In a 1915 side battle of World War I, South Africa defeated the Germans and occupied what they called South West Africa, yet even today, close to a hundred years later, there is a distinct German character to the town of Windhoek. Many of the stores and restaurants have German names and even write their menus in that language. Many of the whites we saw spoke German, and

KOSHER FOREVER Windhoek's cemetery is the most accurate witness to the city's Jewish citizens; (right) Walter Galler's wife paid tribute to her Jewish husband by cutting the Hebrew words off a matzoh box, even though they wound up upside down on the tombstone

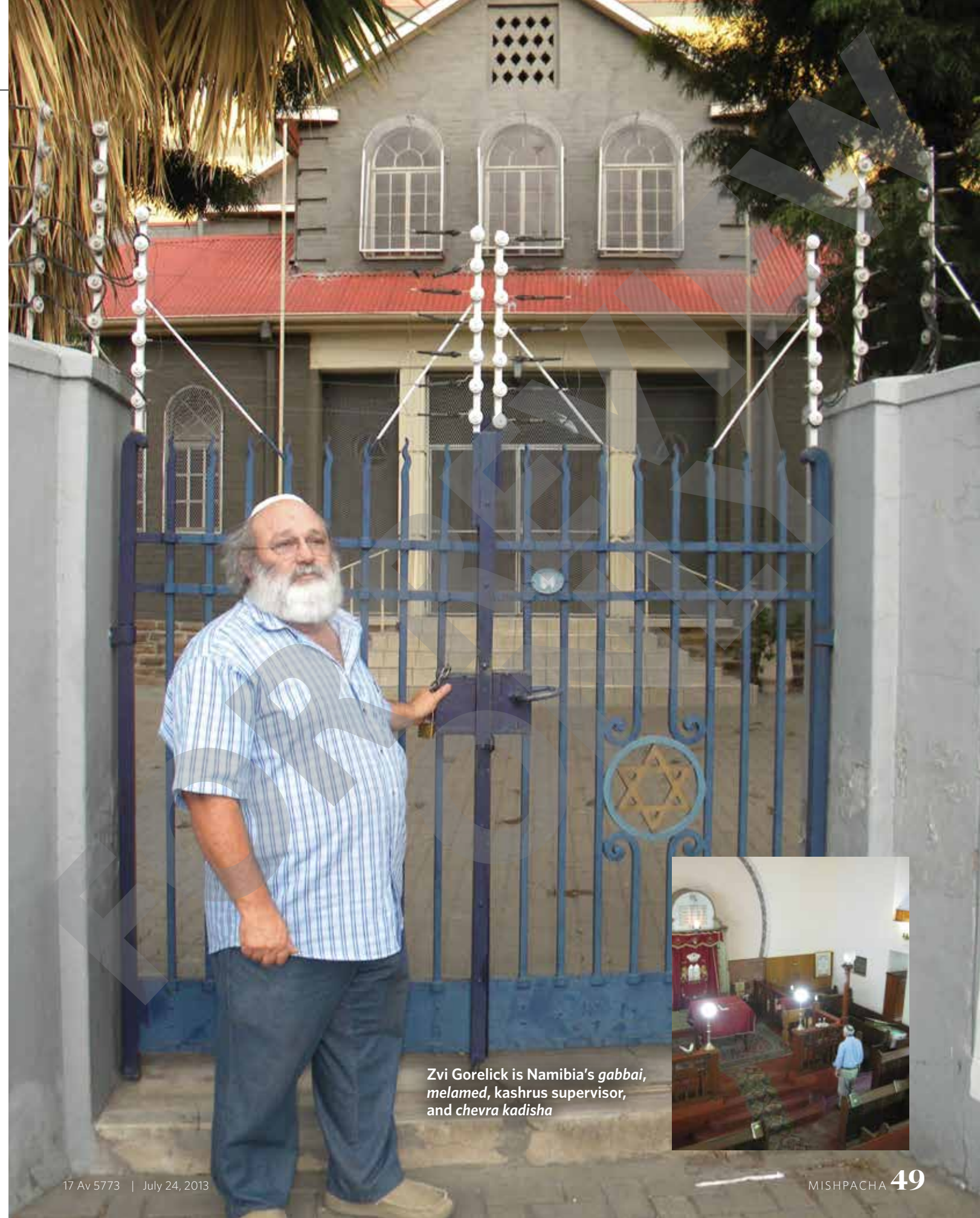
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there are direct flights to Germany a few times a week.

Southern Africa was actually a distant, safe haven with fresh opportunities for persecuted Eastern European Jews in the early 1900s. Zvi's father, Samuel, was 16 years old when he arrived in South Africa in 1925 from a village near Minsk in the Pale of Settlement. He was a saddle stitcher, but the age of horses was pretty much over, and he soon found employment fixing car seats. But then the Depression hit and many local Jews found themselves out of work, spending their days in Cape Town drinking tea and eyeing the future. Presently two Persians by the name of Azizolohoff (whose South African descendants we serendipitously know) showed up transporting Persian lamb, Karakul, which they planned to raise in the country. They were looking for opportunities in South West Africa and Samuel decided to join them.

Refuge in the Bush

Namibia is one of the least populated (2.1 million) and least densely populated (6.6 per square mile) countries in the world, and the capital and largest city Windhoek has only 240,000 people. But the country is blessed with fauna,



Zvi Gorelick is Namibia's *gabbai*, *melamed*, *kashrus* supervisor, and *chevra kadisha*

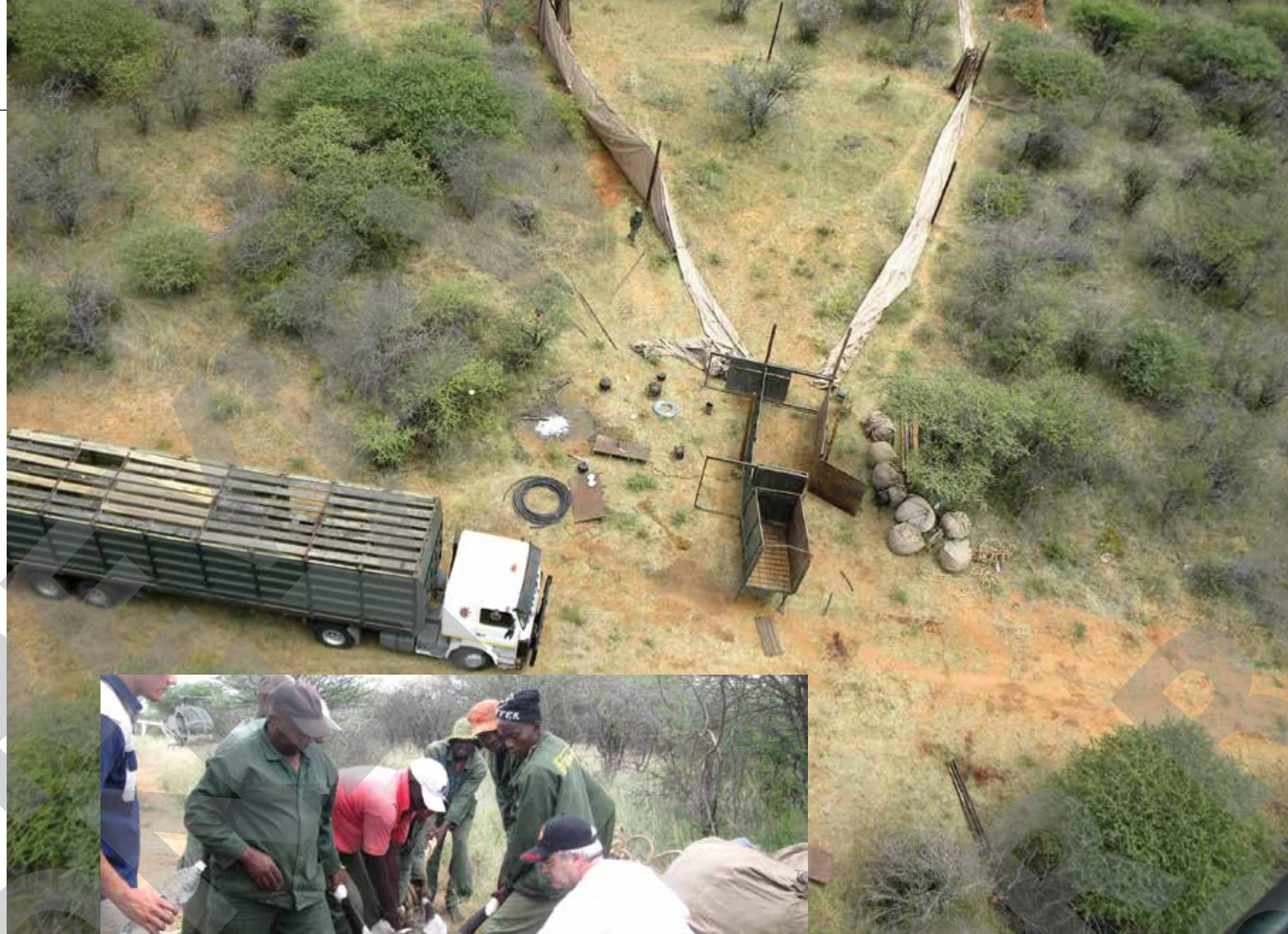


including much big game, which contributes to its tourism industry. At the time, though, Sam Gorelick and his new friends weren't interested in the herds of zebra or giraffe; they were just fortunate they could build a community free of persecution. Together with other pioneers, Sam built a *kehillah* that reached its heyday in the early 1960s with about 150 families. It included a Talmud Torah with around 150 kids, a rabbi/*shochet/mohel*, and a community hall. The area was under South African rule at the time, and many Jewish South African soldiers were stationed there — often more than a hundred of them came for davening on Yom Tov. The community slowly dwindled, and today only a few dozen remain, mostly transient Israeli businessmen.

Meeting Zvi, an authentic *shomer mitzvos* who opened his home and his heart to us, was a pleasant surprise. As kosher meat is not available unless somebody *shechts* locally or gets a special delivery, we brought him packaged meat from Johannesburg to supplement the shipment of chickens he received from Cape Town for Pesach. And our second surprise was the bounty of Johannesburg Beis Din-endorsed products found in the local supermarket. We joked with him that we had not seen so many kosher products since our trip to the supermarket in Bahrain (reported in *Mishpacha* issue #279), where the mass of imported products included a plethora of kosher items from the US and UK. Zvi holds the tiny community together — he runs the prayer services, arranges for Kaddish, teaches Torah to whomever is interested, and gives occasional bar mitzvah or bas mitzvah lessons.

The Gorelicks were pillars of the community, and Zvi learned early on about responsibility — when he was little he'd often stay late Shabbos morning and help clean up the shul. In Talmud Torah, they would say the Shema out loud together, but one day when the teacher asked each one to recite it individually, it was obvious that the kids were just mumbling along and no one knew more than the first two lines. Zvi felt bad and came back to the teacher two days later, having proudly memorized the entire text. As a reward he was given the privilege of closing the shul windows after davening on Shabbos morning, a job he still performs with devotion all these decades later.

The community never did build a *mikveh*, but members would go to a nearby dam on a river. At one point Sam's brother Sholom tried to rig up a floating dock with



WHERE THE ANTELOPE PLAY At the game farm, animals are herded into a long, funnel-shaped blind that closes in on them from behind, until they're contained in a small metal pen, ready for slaughter. (Inset) Ari G. is ready with his *chalaf*, while (right) Ari Z. bids farewell to the second gemsbok

curtains around it for privacy, but it capsized on the first person to use it. It's been years since Namibia had a resident rabbi, the last one being Rabbi Isaac Menashi, who left in 1994. Some of the previous rabbis and religious leaders were Rabbi Zalman Rachman, Rabbi Chaim Perez, and Rabbi Phillip Krein. Mrs. Elana Rachamim taught Talmud Torah here for 17 years.

We asked Zvi if there ever was a second shul in Windhoek; he smiled and said that "with 150 families one shul was good enough. Now that we have 10 families, we need a second shul." There had been two more shuls in the country years back, one in Swakopmund that burned down in 1916, and the other in Keetmanshoop, which closed in 1956 and is now



a dairy. There are still Jewish cemeteries in Swakopmund, Keetmanshoop, and Lüderitz.

The Windhoek shul, which still has a charity fund that supports four widows, was originally constructed in 1924 and modeled on the style of German synagogues, with the *bimah* next to the *aron kodesh* on a raised platform, and women seated upstairs. The building, originally erected in a quiet, open area, is now surrounded by commercial buildings, including an elevated pedestrian mall. As we entered the locked gate of the shul — which was repainted in 2009 — Zvi noticed that the security

"With 150 families one shul was good enough. Now that we have 10 families, we need a second shul"

wall, topped with an electric fence to keep out prowlers (such fences are ubiquitous in South African Jewish communities), had been tampered with. Then he pointed out the heavy metal screens on all the windows and explained that they were put in place after rumors surfaced of a planned grenade attack on the shul in about 1978; the screens would deflect the grenades.

Over the years, Zvi has planted many trees on the property, yet we noticed that there was no *esrog* tree. We suggested that he plant one, but he adamantly refused, answering, "my father said definitively that *esrogim* must come from Eretz Yisrael."

With such a dwindling community, we naturally asked Zvi about the *chevra kadisha*, and not surprisingly, he is the *chevra kadisha* — although he wistfully admitted that he worries, "Who will do my *taharah* and *levayah*?"

Finally Kosher As we walked through the well-kept Jewish cemetery, we couldn't help noticing many graves of young children and babies. In the early years of the community, life must have been difficult and health care minimal. We passed the tombstone of a young man named



Seeing the bush from the sky in an open cockpit with wildebeest and giraffe stampeding below rounded out our African adventure



Moshe Charney, and could only guess as to the adventures of his life and the tragedy of his death at age 18 by reading his epitaph (loosely translated from the Hebrew): "You yearned to go up to Israel and help others to as well/ But Death met you and inserted itself in your way/ And like Moses you too died in this desert."

Over the years some of the Jews left the fold, moved out of the small towns, and married non-Jews. One such man was Walter Galler, who lived in Swakopmund, then a small German port on the Atlantic, up the coast from the larger and better situated British port of Walvis Bay. Yet it seems that no matter how far a Jew may stray, when Pesach arrives he strives to procure some matzoh, and indeed that is what Mr. Galler did every year. When Mr. Galler passed away in 1939 at the age of 51, his widow wanted to have some mention on his tombstone of his Jewish heritage in addition to the Magen David. So she cut out the Hebrew "kosher l'Pesach" label from some matzoh, and the non-Jewish stone mason then chiseled the letters into the tombstone. However, not knowing Hebrew, he inscribed them upside down.

As we were walking, Zvi stopped in front of two graves — those of his parents. He looked at us wistfully and announced, "Today is my father's *yahrtzeit*." He told us about his parents' devotion to the community and how his father had been a learned man, having studied with great rabbis in Belarus. Zvi was able to put together a minyan for Kaddish the day before, on Shabbos, but knew there was no way he could gather one for today. Yet he was pleased that at least we had accompanied him and recited Keil Malei Rachamim in their memory.

Lavish Hostage There are other Jewish connections to Namibia as well. When I sent a message to a friend in Israel that we were in Namibia, he fired back an SMS within seconds asking if we had met Kobi (Jacob) Alexander. Kobi is an Israeli-American businessman who in 1981 cofounded Comverse Technologies. As Comverse's CEO, he built it into a global player that was listed on the NASDAQ 100 and S&P 500. The company became a leader in providing software and systems for telecommunication companies worldwide.

In 2006 he was charged with multiple counts of conspiracy to commit fraud, relating to the timing of Comverse's stock option grants. He fled to Namibia, a country with no extradition treaty to Israel or the US, and today spends his time with his lawyers trying to arrange his way out of this large jail in which he lives life lavishly. He has also invested heavily in his adopted country and recently began to develop a project on the Namibian coast called Shalom Park. Zvi recently taught Kobi's son for his bar mitzvah, and Kobi flew over 150 friends and relatives for the celebration. We didn't have time to meet the family, but we did speak to Kobi's wife, who was busy koshering her kitchen for her Orthodox family's imminent visit.

And, so as not to leave out Zvi's political connections: former Namibian cabinet minister

Andimba Toivo ya Toivo, once a political prisoner in South Africa's notorious Robben Island jail, married Vikki, a Jewish lawyer. Their twin girls studied with Zvi for their bas mitzvah.

And then there's Lev Leviev, who does not live in Namibia but plays a large role here. He is an Uzbek-born Chabad chassid and noted billionaire, and is president of LLD Diamonds, which employs over 1,000 Namibians.

In 2008, a local white woman and Judeophile named Maggie Edmunds had been sitting at home in a room with a Magen David and a Tanach, when a single-engine Cessna carrying five Israelis from De Beers NamGem diamond polishing factory crashed through the perimeter wall of her property, bursting into flames. She and her family were saved, as was the Magen David and Tanach, but the pilot and five passengers were killed. Maggie was overcome with gratitude when she realized that both she and the Jewish items weren't damaged, and felt her personal miracle deserved a memorial outside her house. A small apartment was constructed for the families and friends of the deceased when they come to visit, and she is a regular attendee at the shul.

Jews have contributed in many ways to Namibia and we were disappointed to discover that we had just missed one of the country's Jewish icons. When we came into the shul we saw a prominent seat marked with a sign instructing congregants to leave that place


untouched until a certain date. When we queried Zvi, he told us that it had been the regular seat of Harold Pupkewitz, known as the "King of Namibia." Although we had not heard of him, every Namibian, Jewish or not, knew who he was. He passed away less than a year ago at the age of 96, having been a towering leader in all aspects of Namibian business. The president, prime minister, and many other dignitaries attended his funeral — the entire event organized by Zvi and run according to halachah.

Pupkewitz was born in Vilna and moved to South West Africa in 1925 with his mother and two brothers. He continued to work a six-day week well into his 90s and at the time of his death was assumed to be the richest person in Namibia. And he was an active member of the Windhoek Hebrew Congregation for almost its entire existence and a well-known philanthropist. Of late, he was the congregation's honorary vice president,



as well as vice chairman of the African Jewish Congress, a position he utilized to vigorously fight anti-Semitism for many years. To honor his memory, his seat in shul had been enshrined for the year of mourning.

Watch those Horns Our plans called for an early Monday morning departure from Windhoek to *shecht* two wild gemsbok for some local Jews. These beautiful large antelopes are native to southern Africa and are not in any way an endangered species.


We were looking forward to a good night's rest, but way before the hint of dawn appeared in the sky, the incessant crowing of Zvi's neighbor's rooster made us want to go and *shecht* it on the spot. This actually made us wonder about the morning *brachah*, "He Who gives the rooster understanding to differentiate between day and night." We didn't think that the fact that Zvi lives right off Elephant




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Horns and Thorns in the African Bush

Street — which adjoins Rhino Street (truthfully!) — was any excuse for there to be so much noise that early in the morning.

Our departure was delayed, but that too was for the best, because we soon heard that there is a leather and horn factory in the Windhoek industrial zone. Unable to withstand the pull to observe the process of tanning leather and polishing horns, we paid a visit and were utterly amazed by the quantity and diversity of animal hides and horns that are processed — another indication of the sheer numbers of animals in this striking, arid country.

Before we left South Africa, Rabbi Maisels warned us to be careful of the elephants and lions along the road to the game farm. While he did exaggerate a bit, baboons and warthogs were plentiful as we drove. The trip was long and the scenery magnificent; green, open plains, a blue sky with fluffy white clouds, and birds darting around. When we finally arrived at the private game farm, we discovered that the animals had not even been caught yet, and the owner was nowhere to be found.

When he showed up, he quickly got moving and we were more than glad to be able to observe how he captures animals. He is truly an expert and has been rounding up large game, including elephants and giraffe, for clients, including zoos and game parks, for almost 30 years. In this instance, his mission was to capture and restrain two wild African antelope, without injuring them and thereby causing them to become *treifos*.

While we were bumping over the fields in large open Jeeps on our way to the *shechitah*, we suddenly heard a fearsome roar coming up from behind us, and turned our heads to see a small, two-man helicopter doing a flyover, a mere few feet above us. With a wave, he whirled away and began herding the animals that he could see from above into a quarter-mile long blind. This trap was funnel-shaped, and as the animals came in, farmhands closed long curtains behind them. Ultimately the animals were driven in and contained in a small metal pen.

The pilot then landed nearby and arrived to supervise the next step. The pointy

three-foot-long horns of these animals are deadly, and the farmhands carefully fitted rubber tubes over each horn. Next came the challenging and dangerous task of restraining the animals, which each weighed approximately 600 pounds. It took about ten men to wrestle and tie up each animal. In order to prevent *tzaar baalei chayim*, unnecessary pain to the animal, our knives were ready and checked, so once the animal was held still, it was but a few seconds before it was finished off. The local farmhands expressed how impressed they were with the sharpness of our knives and the speed with which the animals died following the *shechitah*.

As we were *shechting* a wild animal — a *chayah* as opposed to a *beheimah*, a domesticated animal, we had to be concerned with the relevant halachic differences between them. A *chayah*, like a bird, requires *kisui hadam*, covering the blood with a *brachah* after slaughter; and *cheilev*, certain fats that are forbidden in a *beheimah*, are permitted in a *chayah*.

Once we ascertained that the *shechitah* itself was kosher, a field butchery was set up. With the carcass hung upside down on a tepee of poles, we checked the lungs and both animals turned out to be *glatt*. We used indelible dye to stamp the meat with the “Kosher Namibia” community stamp. Because of the halachah of *basar shenisaleim min ha’ayin* — that kosher meat may not be left unsupervised, lest it be switched with nonkosher meat — stamping it assured us that no tampering could happen. While the animals were being cleaned, we hopped on the helicopter back to the farmhouse. What an exhilarating ride, to see Africa from the sky in an open cockpit with a daredevil pilot. The herds of wildebeest and giraffe stampeded below as we swooped down close to them.

Better Late than Never What was supposed to be a one-hour event had turned into an entire afternoon, and we were running quite late as we started the long journey back to the airport. Our plan was to return to South Africa early that evening in preparation for a full next-day

visit with the Lemba, an African tribe who claim to be descended from one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Well, we missed the evening flight and in the end, we were relegated to a shortened visit with this tribe, who number about 80,000 and live in South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The next morning we arrived back in South Africa, and drove out to meet the Lemba, which we’d heard so much about. Genetic tests seem to back up the tribe’s belief that centuries ago a group of Jewish men married African women and settled on the continent. Members of the priestly clan of the Lemba, known as the Buba, were even discovered to have a genetic element also found among Kohanim, but the women don’t have any Jewish genetic markers. The Lemba also have a prized religious artifact that they say connects them to their Jewish ancestry — what they claim is a replica of the Biblical Ark of the Covenant known as the *ngoma lungundu*.

The Lemba practice a nonhalachic circumcision, avoid eating pork and food with animal blood, and slaughter their animals. They also have a sacred prayer language that seems to be a mixture of ancient Hebrew and Arabic; yet despite what looks like a historic tie to Judaism, today most Lemba are Christians or Muslims.

Because our time was cut short, we didn’t do a thorough investigation of the Lemba, although we did meet with a member of their council of elders. But despite our initial excitement, their knowledge and practice of anything Jewish seems less than what we were led to believe. And although they’ve lost most of what they once supposedly knew, someday we’d like to go back, investigate further, and give *Mishpacha* readers a more thorough report.

We might have missed a deeper investigation of the Lemba, but we did get to enjoy another night of Zvi’s warm hospitality — and culinary capability — in Namibia; he was scheduled to *kasher* the game the following day. But we brought him one gift for the night — a fresh gemsbok liver, which we broiled and ate for dinner. Zvi’s chopped antelope liver was gourmet. ●