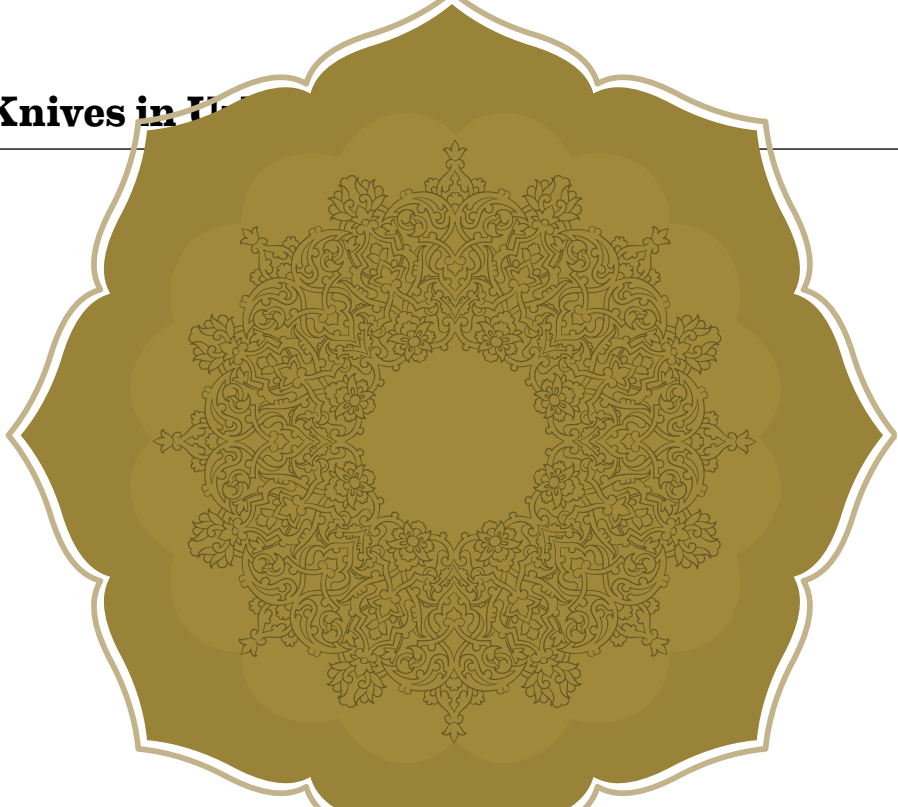


Sharpening Knives in Uzbekistan



THE SHULS ARE RENOVATED, BUT THE CUSTOMS ARE ANCIENT. THE JEWS ARE FEW, BUT TIES WITH ISRAEL ARE WARM. THE STREETS ARE MUDDY AND POT-HOLED, YET THE SQUARES ARE MAJESTIC. UZBEKISTAN, THIS COUNTRY OF CONTRADICTIONS, WAS THE LATEST VENUE FOR OUR INTREPID TRAVELERS — AS THEY PREPARED THEIR *CHALAFS* FOR THEIR NEXT HALACHIC ADVENTURE IN THE LAND OF THE BUKHARIANS

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



When we decided to visit Uzbekistan,

we offered our services to *shecht* meat and birds for the Jews, since there is only one active *shochet* in the country, a young man in Bukhara, and he rarely gets to the other cities. Our friend, the Israeli ambassador, Dr. Hillel Newman, jumped at the opportunity. He and his wife are *shomer mitzvos* and thus maintain a kosher ambassadorial residence in Tashkent, the country’s capital city. He explained the difficulty that the Jews of Uzbekistan have in obtaining kosher meat, because no kosher meat is imported to the country. But there was one problem: our large knives might raise eyebrows at the Tashkent airport.

Dr. Newman solved this problem by suggesting that we send the knives from Israel via diplomatic pouch, a first for us. The knives and stones were wrapped and delivered to the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. When we arrived at the Ambassador’s Residence in Tashkent, the knives were already there and waiting.

That turned out to be just the first of many interesting challenges that awaited us in Uzbekistan, a country which today has only about 10,000 Jews, but whose rich Jewish heritage stretches back more than a thousand years.

Who Eats Kosher Meat? Although the main beneficiaries of our *shechitah* were to be the Jews of Tashkent, which is where most of Uzbekistan Jews now live, our itinerary was arranged in such a way that our first stop was actually in Bukhara, a small city that can boast of having two *shochtim* among its residents.

The elder *shochet* is referred to as the rabbi and is a religious functionary in the town’s larger shul. While he is about 75 years old, with a long, white beard and a large handle-bar mustache, he, like many of the people who have lived hard lives, looks much older than his years. He trained during the difficult Soviet years and related to us how his *rebbe* was exiled to Siberia for the crime of teaching Torah. When his *rebbe* was banished, he fled to Dushanbe, the current capital of Tajikistan, to continue his studies. He ultimately returned to Bukhara, and following the fall of the Soviet Union he made several trips to Israel to further his knowledge and acquire Israeli certification as a *shochet*.

Because he now rarely *shechts*, we were surprised to hear that he would be *shechting* on Motzaei Shabbos, and we were keen to observe him. But it was not to be. We requested — almost begged — to accompany him, but to no avail. He informed us that he would be

going to a place 15 kilometers (about nine miles) outside of town, and since he would be butchering the cow as well, he wouldn’t return until near midnight. He then blithely informed us that he was doing all this for a Muslim! Why? “The Muslims also know that the meat tastes better when a Jew *shechts* it,” he explained.

The second *shochet* is a young single man who learned in Yerushalayim and then returned to Bukhara, where he lives with his parents and brother. He had invited us for a Shabbos meal but was unfortunately sick when we arrived, and didn’t *shecht* during the time we were in Bukhara.

There is such a demand for kosher meat in this tiny community that there is even a small storefront selling it. The son of the proprietor got married the week before we arrived and it was the first wedding the community had celebrated in years. While our sense was that people overall were not strictly *shomer mitzvos*, nonetheless, when kosher meat was available they greatly preferred to buy it, rather than *treif*.

While Bukhara had no need for our services, the same could not be said for the rest of the country. Samarkand, a five-hour drive from Bukhara over roads full of potholes, has not had a *shochet* in years and relies on



REMNANTS OF A BYGONE ERA (Clockwise from top left) The ornate door of the *taharah* room in the Samarkand cemetery. A *rimon* in a shul in Bukhara. A *tzedakah* box in Bukhara’s cemetery — as a popular tourist site, the funds help support the community. Ari and Ari at the alleged tomb of the prophet Daniel — one of several possible locations. The emblem of the czar in the home of the wealthiest Jew in Samarkand — his fortune was confiscated but the mansion remained. A prayer for the Soviet Union, “protector of world peace,” which hung in Tashkent’s main shul during the Soviet era

bringing in the *shochet* from Bukhara, or even one from Israel, which is a very significant expenditure for this poor community. Our hostess in Samarkand, Nina, was warm and welcoming and answered many questions about the community, but did not mention a need for *shechitah*.

Then her husband walked in and asked if we could *shecht* a turkey from his small flock in the courtyard. Glad to oblige, we explained that there was only one problem — our knives were in Tashkent. Nina then remembered that she had a *shechitah* knife that had been left by a previous tenant of hers, but she was unsure if it was good. She produced a near-perfect knife, along with the stones needed for us to bring it up to par. Since her husband particularly enjoys turkey meat, patiently awaiting the visit every few months of the Bukhara *shochet*, he was quite elated when we provided him with a kosher bird.

Nina also arranged for us to be taken to the local Jewish museum, which tells the sad story of the Jews under Communism. This immense mansion was built by a wealthy Jewish merchant, Abraham Kolontarov, in the early 20th century. His house was so beautiful that the czar himself stayed there on a visit to Samarkand. The main room, some say, was a shul. It still has today exquisite plaster moldings of the czar’s crest, a double-headed eagle, with a Magen David in the center. Just

a few years after the mansion’s completion, it was taken by the Communists. Abraham, whose factories and fortune were confiscated, was known to spend the rest of his life coming to the gardens and telling people that he had built the house.

When we returned to Tashkent, it was time for us to get down to more serious work. In addition to the locals who are interested in kosher meat, some of the Israeli embassy staff — the ambassador and three staff members — order kosher meat in large quantities when it’s available. It was therefore decided to dedicate at least half a day to *shechting* fowl, sheep, and cows. We were told that 47 chickens would be arriving at the Ashkenazic shul, after which we would head out of town to a slaughterhouse for *shechitah* of the larger animals.

Our first concerns were the halachic issues of *shechitah* in freezing weather; there was snow on the ground in the shul courtyard. While our ancestors undoubtedly dealt with these questions on a regular basis, we are accustomed to *shechting* indoors in temperature-controlled environments. A *shechitah* knife must be examined with the fingernail before and after every *shechitah* to guarantee that it is nick-free. The *Aruch HaShulchan* (YD 18:12), *Beis David* (18:12), and *Mateh Asher* on the *Simlah Chadashah* (18:8) all note that since the cold causes the finger to be less sensitive, before checking the knife in the winter one should warm the hand. We therefore were careful to go back into the shul building in order to check the knife.

The second conundrum was how to do *kisui hadam*. There is a Torah obligation to cover the blood of a bird or “wild” animal (*chayah*) with dirt below and above. This entails placing dirt on the spot where the blood will drip, saying a *brachah* after the *shechitah*, and then putting dirt over the blood. On the way to the shul we reviewed the options available when the ground is frozen and covered with snow. The *Beis Yosef* cites an opinion that permits doing the mitzvah with snow, and the *Pri Megadim* says that if there is no other choice snow can be used but no *brachah* is said. However, the *Rema* rules that snow should not be used for *kisui hadam*.

It turned out that all of our concerns were moot. When we arrived we found that buckets, along with prepared dirt, were on hand. The buckets, into which some dirt was placed, were positioned under the draining cones, and the birds were *shechted*.



On the roof of Samarkand’s shul, even the drainpipe is Jewish



The Torah scrolls in the Fergana Valley are still in use

When Mr. Shapiro arrived, he extended his arms and two workers materialized to help him shed his coat. Another worker brought glasses and drink

Was Daniel HaNavi Buried in Uzbekistan?

During our travels, we discovered a tourist site we just couldn’t pass up. We were told that outside of Samarkand is the burial site of the prophet Daniel. The notion struck us as strange, since we knew that Daniel lived in Bavel — i.e., modern-day Iraq. Indeed, the most accepted location of his grave is found in Susa, Iran, where there exists a large tomb that is frequented by both Muslims and Iran’s Jewish community.

An important figure like Daniel would, of course, have more than one place claiming to be his burial site, and there are no less than six different locations that lay claim to this privilege: three locations in Iraq, two in Iran, and the one in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. But if the Samarkand locals are going to claim Daniel is buried there, they need to come up with a good explanation for how he got to Uzbekistan. And they have one.

That local legend claims that the Turkic-Mongol conqueror Amir Timur (Tamerlane) repeatedly failed to conquer Syria. It was suggested that Syria’s success was due to its hosting Daniel’s remains. Timur sent an expeditionary force that succeeded in bringing back the body and burying it in Uzbekistan, a move that facilitated his subsequent victory over Syria. Timur went on to establish a dynasty and is today a local hero, complete with a new museum in his honor located in Tashkent.

Since our driver knew exactly where Daniel’s tomb was — it’s a well-known tourist attraction that sits inside a Muslim cemetery located right off the main road — we had no problem finding it. An entrance fee of one dollar got us access to a huge structure seated high on a hill of mud. Inside the mausoleum is a 54-foot-long tomb.

In response to our queries, the Muslim caretaker informed us that the cemetery was, indeed, Muslim. But Daniel, of course, was “*ya-hud*,” Jewish.

After *kisui hadam* was fulfilled, we went into the shul to warm up — but not for long. A few minutes later an old man carrying a huge turkey appeared at the door. He said he lived nearby and had heard that there was *shechitah* taking place. If there was an opportunity to have *shechted* meat, he simply could not pass it up, and so he had schlepped his bird to the shul. By this time Ambassador Newman had arrived to accompany us to the animal *shechitah* and we were able to honor him with doing the mitzvah of *kisui hadam* for the first time in his life.

Chicken Necks While we were in Tashkent, we were confronted with an unusual quandary that we had never grappled with before, and which highlighted a century-old debate in Bukhara. As Ari G. finished *shechting* one of the birds, he sensed that he had cut clean through between the vertebrae and had completely severed the spine, so we put that bird aside for later inspection. The *Beis Dovid* (*Yesod HaBayis* 24:3) calls this an “unusual occurrence” and although the *Shulchan Aruch* (YD 24:5) rules that such a *shechitah* is kosher, the *Rema* says that the custom of Ashkenazim is to treat the bird as nonkosher.

For centuries, the Jews of Bukhara had followed Sephardic practice as detailed in the *Shulchan Aruch*. However, about 100 years ago an Ashkenazic Chabad emissary from Chevron came to serve as a *shochet* and attempted to impose some of the stringencies of the *Rema* on the Jews. In 1904, some of the local rabbis turned to Eretz Yisrael’s chief rabbi for mediation and guidance.

A century later, we were in the same country, confronted by a similar question: for a community of Sephardim, should we disqualify a chicken based on a stringency of the *Rema* that is actually rejected by many of the later Ashkenazic authorities? The major difference between then and now is that during the interwar years a large influx of Ashkenazic Jews found their way to Uzbekistan. Therefore, we were actually *shechting* for a combined Ashkenazic-Bukharian community. In these circumstances, we felt we had no choice but to tell the people that this bird was not to be eaten, and we handed it to one of the non-Jewish workers.

Ambassador Newman, who had been instrumental in arranging our *shechitah* in Tashkent, personally escorted us from the shul to the animal slaughterhouse in his diplomatic armored jeep. Since the community has difficulty affording the meat, on this occasion the cows and sheep were purchased by a local, larger-than-life, wealthy Jewish individual named Mr. Shapiro. To show his hospitality, Mr. Shapiro had us brought to a restaurant he owns. When we arrived, we were the only people sitting in this fancy 100-person establishment. When Mr. Shapiro arrived, he extended his arms and two workers materialized to help him shed his coat. Another worker brought glasses and drink.

Mr. Shapiro, who returned to his Jewish roots a number of years ago following a positive interaction with a rabbi, talked with us about Judaism for four hours. He proudly showed us the menorah and kosher wines he keeps for Jewish functions, for which he brings out his kosher pots and cutlery, originally purchased to host a visit by US senator Joseph Lieberman. Today, he helps support the exceedingly poor local community, a role previously filled by the most famous Jewish son of Uzbekistan, Lev Leviev.

When we tried to excuse ourselves, saying that we needed to get our *shechitah* knives that were in the embassy, Mr. Shapiro ignored us and picked up his

cell phone. Fifteen minutes later a car arrived with the knives.

A person could get used to this VIP treatment very quickly, we decided. But if we were made to feel like VIPs during our trip, a large part of the credit goes to Dr. Newman, who is in his fourth year as the Israeli ambassador to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. He brings to his position a Jewish academic background with a PhD in Jewish history. In addition, as the son of a South African rabbi and the brother of an American community rabbi, he well understands the needs of “out of town” Jewish communities. (His father, furthermore, served as a “rabbi to country communities” for many years before accepting a post in a large community.)

To help strengthen and enhance Israel’s ties with these Central Asian Muslim nations, he has arranged many visits by Israeli specialists to share their knowledge, including Israeli specialists in milk production, water conservation, and the medical field. When Ari Z. mentioned that he teaches neuroscience at Bar-Ilan University and was willing to present some of his work, Ambassador Newman arranged for him to give a scientific talk at the Tashkent State Postdoctoral Medical Institute.

Ambassador Newman is also involved with many local Jewish issues. For example, there is a law in Uzbekistan that any cemetery not used for 20 years may be plowed over and built upon. After the mass exodus of the country’s Jews, in many former Jewish communities all that remains is the Jewish cemetery. When word reached Ambassador Newman that one of these was in danger of being destroyed, he approached UNESCO, without making a big fuss, and received international recognition for the importance of the site. Afterward, he quietly negotiated with the Uzbeki government to preserve the cemetery.

Shabbos Mud We spent a week in Uzbekistan, which meant we had to decide where to spend Shabbos. Although our friend the ambassador had invited us to spend Shabbos with him in Tashkent, we wanted a smaller-town, authentic



COMMON GROUND (From top) Dr. Ari Greenspan, a dentist, enjoys the gold teeth of the locals; Dr. Ari Zivotofsky and the local *gabbai* examine the shul in Tashkent; *shechting* fowl brought back a hundred-year-old controversy

experience. We therefore decided on Bukhara, the country’s fifth-largest city. The region around Bukhara has been inhabited for at least five millennia. The city of Bukhara, located on the former Silk Road, has existed for half that time but it has long been a center of trade, scholarship, culture, and religion.

Early Friday morning the two of us, along with our traveling companion, Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, caught the short flight from Tashkent to Bukhara, whose small airport sees no more than a handful of flights a day, if that many. After we descended the stairs to the tarmac, we discovered that the airport doors were locked. Since it was not Israelis we were with, everyone waited patiently for an airport employee to show up and let us in out of the cold wind.

Our hosts for the weekend were the El-natanov brothers, Raphael and Emanuel, and their families. Emanuel, who speaks Hebrew, met us at the airport and gave us a tour of Bukhara’s Jewish sites.

For centuries Jews lived within a particular section of the old city. In Ashkenazi communities it is called the *shtetl* or ghetto. North African Jews call it the *melach*. The Bukharian word for neighborhood, however, is “*mahallah*,” and as we toured the *mahallah* to see what was left, we jokingly said that it was indeed a “*machalah*” — a disease. None of the streets, if they can be called that, are paved and we found ourselves walking through muddy alleyways all of Shabbos, even though there was no rain! The wooden electric poles, all seemingly ready to fall down, added to the ramshackle feel of the area. Yet this dilapidated scene was surrounded and punctuated by majestic and picturesque palaces and mosques set on well-kept public squares, typical of Central Asia. We soon saw how they are kept clean when teams of babushkas armed with twig brooms began to sweep up the street, while a group of men with shovels cleared the snow — a reminder that we were in the former Soviet Union.

The old city, including the *mahallah*, was constructed as a series of courtyards. Thus,

A few minutes later an old man carrying a huge turkey appeared at the door. He said he lived nearby and had heard that there was *shechitah* taking place



Funny Money

Often before our trips we look up the local currency and its exchange rate. In this case we noticed the shocking rate of 1,820 Uzbeki “som” for each US dollar. Upon reaching Uzbekistan, we discovered that the currency’s problems extended beyond the necessity of having to do math with very large numbers. Apples and bananas cost thousands of som, and three nights in the hotel put us over a million — but the largest bill in circulation is only 1,000 som. Thus, when one wants to buy a car and avoid the many months’ bureaucratic delay involved in bank transfers, one must literally bring along suitcases full of 1,000-som bills. Having converted our dollars to the local currency, we felt like gangsters when we had to pay our hotel bill with wads of cash.

from the dirt alleyways one sees just walls and a few doors. Turning into those doorways leads into another world, whether it was the courtyard with the shul buildings or a family courtyard in which multiple relatives might have been living for generations. These courtyards and their buildings often were in better condition than one might have guessed based on the main alleyways of the *mahallah*. But conditions in Bukhara, as well as in other parts of the country, are often limited. For example, when we were in Samarkand, we couldn’t visit the shul in the old city at night because the entire old city had no electricity or natural gas. The irony is that Uzbekistan is a major exporter of natural gas, and yet often its own people go without.

Bukhara has both a “large shul” and a “small shul,” which are both actually about the same size. The “large shul” was like almost all the others we saw in Uzbekistan, renovated and undergoing further renovations. Emanuel explained that there was a steady stream of tourists, especially in the summer, and it was therefore important that the shul be in good shape. And indeed, toward the end of Shabbos morning davening, a group of non-Jewish British tourists showed up at the shul to see the “exotic Jews of Bukhara.” It is clear that the shuls aren’t being renovated for the sake of the local Jewish community, since when we asked Emanuel how many Jews are left in Bukhara, he told us “about 300, including

the Ashkenazim” — who are for the most part not very involved in the community.

While walking on a dark mud path in the *mahallah* on the way home from shul, Raphael said, “Here live the Jewish Muslims.” Surprised by his comment, we asked him what he meant. He explained that generations earlier there had been forced conversions of the Jews. While these people see themselves as Muslim, everybody knows about and acknowledges their Jewish roots.

Board Meeting Minyan Friday night davening in Bukhara was a unique experience. About 15 old men gathered in the shul for a lengthy service. Many of them were unable to follow the siddur



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and, with a cup of tea in hand, whiled away the time reading the international Bukharian Jewish newspaper that had been distributed. After Kabbalas Shabbos, someone got up to speak. While we didn't understand what he was saying, it was clear that it wasn't a *dvar Torah*. It emerged that we were witnessing a community board meeting. The president decided he was not well enough to continue his duties, gave a resignation speech, and called for nominations for a new president. This was followed by elections, cheers of good wishes for the new president, and Maariv — and all the while the *kehillah* was enjoying their hot drinks.

Friday night dinner was a one of a kind moving event for all of us, one of the highlights of the trip. The participants at the meal included those members of the Elnatanov family who were in Bukhara, the three of us — Ari, Ari, and Rabbi Birnbaum — an older, distant, lonely cousin who lives with them in the winter, and an employee of Raphael's, who also happens to speak English and served as a translator.

There are three Elnatonov brothers, one of whom was in Israel with their parents during our visit. Seeing that the vast majority of the community has emigrated, we queried why their family remained. Indeed, the link between Bukhara and Israel is amazing. The well-known Bukharian quarter of Jerusalem was founded by Bukharian *olim* in the late 19th century and there was subsequently a steady stream of two-way traffic.

The answer the Einatonov brothers gave was a lesson in *kibud av v'eim*. The parents felt attached to their native city and had

no intention of ever leaving. The brothers all agreed that as long as the parents were staying, they would stay with them. Several years ago they approached their parents and asked if it would be okay if the grandchildren would at some point move to Israel; the elder generation gave their blessings. Of course, the best-laid plans of man are subject to changes by Hashem. The grandfather took ill within the last year and the care that he requires is unavailable in Uzbekistan, but is available in Israel. The older couple has now moved to Israel, and the sons ensure that one of them is with them at all times.

While the Jews who are left in Bukhara are not necessarily the most educated, and there are few books to be found in their homes, the customs that they keep they preserve rigorously. Kiddush was recited over a cup in a saucer, and they made sure that much wine spilled into that saucer. It soon became clear why. The cup itself was passed around for the men to drink from, while the saucer was passed to the women, who each sipped from it. They could not explain the origin of this practice, but told us that this was their local custom. This was repeated during the day as well, but not at Havdalah. When the women didn't drink from the saucer, they explained that it was obvious why not: the wine in the saucer had another function — to put out the candle.

The long, long Friday night meal was punctuated by fascinating conversation about their family and the community's history. There were also *zmiros*, *divrei Torah*, discussions about Israel, and many expressions of gratitude for our visit. At one point in our conversation Rabbi Birnbaum suggested that they

should try to say Shema with their 4-year-old daughter every night. While not showing signs of being offended, they stated that they of course did that, and had the girl belt out a rendition of Shema at the table.

It seems that a local custom is to warm up during the meal with multiple *l'chayims* over vodka. Rabbi Birnbaum and Ari G. were more than glad to participate, but Ari Z. tried to decline. When pressure from the hosts gradually increased, he was saved by a clever Ari G., who surreptitiously filled up one of the shot glasses with water. Ari Z. repeatedly sipped at that shot glass of water as if he were painfully finishing off a glass of vodka, and our hosts were satisfied.

As the meal was winding down, the family insisted that all forks and knives had to be removed from the table before *bentsching*, although we pointed out to them that many people don't have this *minhag* on Shabbos. The table was then cleared, with the exception of some bread and salt. Our hosts kept repeating "*mayim acharonim choivah*" (a paraphrase from the *Shulchan Aruch*) as the *mayim acharonim* was passed around the table and, as would seem to be the halacha, everybody — men and women — washed. And they didn't just wash their hands; as per the opinion of the Rif, they washed around their lips as well.

After we *bentsched* the family performed some sort of ritual, where they alternately touched the challah, the salt, and the table. Neither the source nor the meaning of this ritual could be clarified, but we didn't mind. This unsolved mystery gives us a good reason to renew our acquaintance with Uzbekistan's Jewish community another time. ●

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