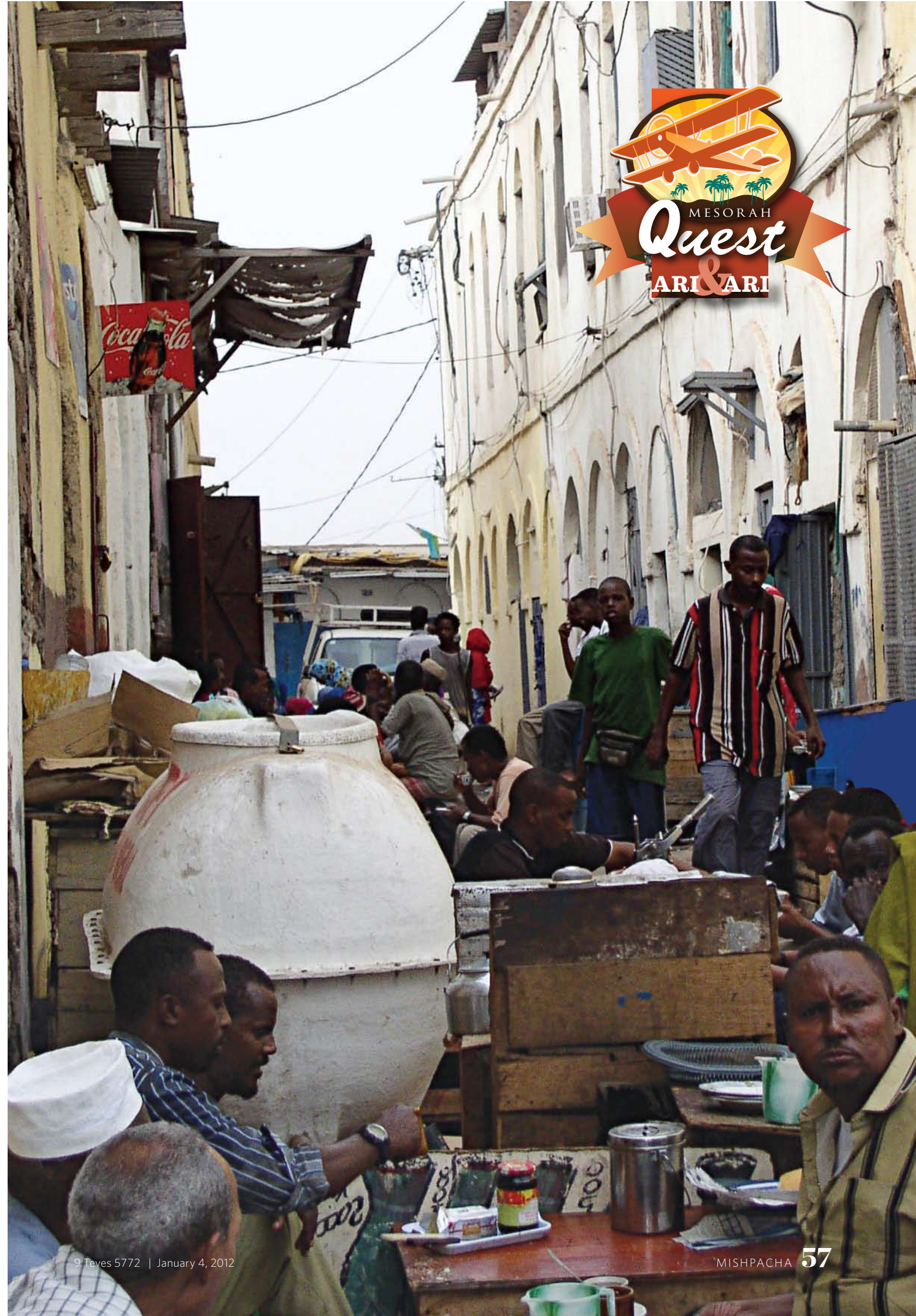




# NO VITAL **Signs** IN DJIBOUTI

Most people have never heard of Djibouti — a poverty-stricken Muslim country located where eastern Africa almost touches the Arabian Peninsula — let alone been there. So what led Ari and Ari to pay a visit to such a forsaken place? If the phrase “forgotten shul” ignites a spirit of adventure in your heart, you’ll understand

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





### It was hot.

We mean really hot. So hot that we knew as soon as the plane door opened why the BBC identified Djibouti as the “hottest place on the planet.” In those first few seconds, as a wave of hot, humid air smothered everyone onboard, we recalled the seemingly cryptic advice of our friend Avraham, a Jew in Ethiopia with business in Djibouti. He had told us, before we boarded our 50-minute flight from Addis Ababa: “Stay in such-and-such hotel. The air conditioning is good.”

We were fortunate to have Avraham to advise us, since most people have never even heard of Djibouti. The country has an unexceptional past that has kept it out of the history books and newspapers. “Modern” Djibouti is a lawless Muslim country that looks like a poverty-stricken sandpit. Both of these factors make it hard to understand why Djibouti was once home to an active Jewish community. It’s only when you locate Djibouti on a map of Africa that you begin to see why any Jew would decide to set up shop in such a place.

**East of Nowhere** Bordered by Eritrea in the north, Ethiopia in the west and south, and Somalia in the southeast — all poor, undeveloped countries — Djibouti, which gained independence from France in 1977, might have dropped off the map, so to speak, and slipped into obscurity if not for one thing: its location. Luckily for this tiny, impoverished, resource-poor country of under a million people and with almost no arable land or potable water, Djibouti sits on the Horn of Africa, a stretch of land that borders the Red Sea and almost touches the Arabian Peninsula. Because of its strategic location, Djibouti serves as an important regional port. The Israeli shipper Zim Lines was a big player in the Djibouti port for decades, and Israeli fruit is transhipped to Arab countries via Djibouti.



In this poverty-stricken sandpit, would we find any remnants of the Jewish community?



### Hidden Away in Djibouti

In a previous article we discussed how members of the anti-British, Zionist Lehi movement were arrested by the British in 1944 and then shipped to a prison in Eritrea without conviction or trial. Yitzchak Shamir, later to become an Israeli prime minister, was among that group.

After numerous attempts, Shamir finally escaped in a false section of a water tanker on its way to Addis Ababa, where he remained crammed into a tiny space for 72 hours. When he reached Addis, Shamir was hidden and protected by our old acquaintance Shalom Shalemei, who was the *gabbai* of the shul in Addis Ababa (see *Mishpacha*, February 17, 2010).

The British were searching for Shamir and wanted to kill him, but he was hidden in a storeroom behind the Addis shul. In that storeroom, which happened to be owned by Mr. Hiel Benin, the builder of the shul in Djibouti, Shamir

hid behind sacks of coffee. When the situation became too precarious, Shamir was secreted to the train station and placed in a cattle car that was owned by Benin. His train was headed for Dire Dawa, an Ethiopian town that also had a small Jewish community.

Shamir ultimately reached French Djibouti. History books will tell you that Shamir lived out the war there in safety in a hotel, and managed to get back to Israel literally the day after the announcement of the establishment of the new state. However, it was not that simple. The British were so incensed that Shamir had slipped through their fingers that they demanded the French turn him over. The French refused to do so, but Shamir realized that for his own safety it was best to leave the hotel where he had been staying for the past several months and find a new hiding place. He therefore escaped to a small, rocky island.

It was on that island that our story comes full circle. Moshe Sion, our friend from Bat Yam, who was then a young man, was tasked by the Jewish community with bringing Shamir kosher food weekly. As a result of this relationship, Shamir retained a life-long connection with Sion. In his autobiography, Shamir is also *mokir tov* to the French, who saved his life.

Djibouti also hosts numerous foreign military bases, including a large one belonging to the United States.

We first heard about Djibouti in 1987, when we traveled to Ethiopia to help the local indigenous Jews. While in Ethiopia we were also introduced to the Adenite Jews, who had immigrated to Africa from Aden, a British colony in southern Yemen. When the opportunity arose many years later to visit Djibouti, we jumped.

But even getting into the country was an adventure. The world was then in the grip of hysteria over a possible bird flu epidemic. Each airport had a gaggle of “experts” to check for sick travelers. At Cairo International, they filmed passengers with infrared video cameras that detected heat signatures to check if anyone had fever. The small, old-fashioned Djibouti airport had no such technology. Instead, there were experts who stuck thermometers in your ear. We passed that exam, but the next, more mundane step almost proved to be our undoing. Ari Z. presented his passport and sailed on through to pick

up the luggage. But Ari G. never emerged on the other side of the one-way glass wall. After what seemed like an unusually long delay Ari Z. realized what had happened: Ari G.’s US passport was expired! When we applied for the visa in the Djiboutian embassy in Addis Ababa, we convinced them to issue it as a rush job and they had not noticed this slight error.

We attempted Talmudic logic with the Djibouti officials: Although Ari G.’s US passport was outdated, his Israeli passport was valid. He thus had a valid passport — albeit from an unacceptable state not recognized by this Muslim country — and an invalid passport from an acceptable country. They were just different passports. The officials must have been Talmudic scholars, since they accepted the logic.

We left the terminal to find that the Chelm-like mayhem continued outside. The male taxi drivers were dressed in African skirts and the steering wheels were randomly placed on the right or left.

Poverty and unemployment are

rampant in the country, particularly in the only city, also named Djibouti. On almost every street corner there were women with small stands selling leaves. And lining the street were men sitting and doing nothing but chewing leaves. Our driver said that many men don’t work, instead sitting around all day chewing qat, a leaf that produces a high. And the women work, many of them selling qat.

Although there was no one at the airport to greet us with a welcoming *shalom aleichem* — the present Jewish community consists of just a few isolated, unaffiliated Jews — as we set off for the center of town we were determined to find whatever still remained of the Jewish community.

**Open Sesame** Djibouti is very close to Yemen and, as a result, Yemenite and Saudi influence on the country’s culture is great. Yemenite Jews left their stamp on the country as well. When the Jews of Aden were looking for business opportunities in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they came to the Horn of Africa. One

## Just Asking

There are several reasons why a visitor to Djibouti might not want to order a cup of coffee. One is the heat. Another is the halachic issue concerning the milk.

Chazal had a concern that the milk of a nonkosher animal might be mixed in with kosher milk, thus the need for *chalav Yisrael*. In the Western world, mixing *treif* milk with commercially produced cow's milk is virtually unheard of due to government supervision (and the hefty fines a company would have to pay should they try to circumvent the law). It is because of this government supervision that many Jews in the US will consume what Rav Moshe Feinstein called "*chalav ha-companies*" and treat it as Jewish supervised milk. But what about Djibouti?

It seemed to us that there was no reliable governmental supervision and we therefore wondered if there might be a real possibility that a customer would be served nonkosher milk. To test our theory, we asked a bartender about his establishment's café au lait.

"Cow milk or camel milk?" was his reply.

of them was Mr. Hiel Benin, a wealthy Adenite businessman. Wherever Mr. Benin and his family built a business, they also built a shul.

Shortly after the State of Israel was established, practically the entire community left and went to Israel, due to fear of Muslim reprisals. We therefore knew it wouldn't be easy to ferret out information about Jewish Djibouti. Before our trip we were helped by Shalom Zion, a member of the Addis Ababa Adenite community who has a personal connection to the extinct Jewish community of Djibouti, since his maternal grandfather served as the community's last chief rabbi. Our main link once we got to Djibouti was Ali Aref Bourhan, owner of the Plein Ciel, the air-conditioned hotel where we stayed, and, as it turned out, the only person left in the country with any knowledge of the Jews who used to live there. We therefore had yet another reason to thank our friend Avraham for directing us to this hotel. As it turned out, though, staying at the hotel wasn't enough to gain entry to Ali Aref Bourhan.

Bourhan's family, we learned, belongs to the country's Muslim aristocracy. His great-grandfather had been the pasha and his grandfather the village chief, or the "bey of Djibouti," in the late 1800s. Bourhan himself served as vice

president of the government council from 1960 to 1966 and president of the council from 1967 to 1976. In 1991 he led a short-lived coup attempt that briefly landed him in jail. When we asked to meet him, we were rebuffed by a secretary. However, the reception clerk winked at us and said to wait; Bourhan would exit his office soon.

A grouchy old man did exit through the door a bit later and we approached him. He did not want to even enter a discussion, until we said the words "Jewish community." He then stopped, looked us over, and invited us into his office, where he told us an amazing tale. Born in 1934, his childhood best friend was Mordechai, or as he pronounced it, "Meshe." Meshe had to clean the shul every afternoon. Ali would help him so that the two could go out to play quicker. Bourhan then began to sing, in Hebrew, Shabbos songs that he remembered from half a century ago. He also told us to be ready later and he would take us on a tour.

When Bourhan arrived he was driving an old Mercedes, an indication of his relative importance as a former president of the country. He drove us to where the old shul building had stood and began to reminisce about the "good old days," when the country was a French protectorate and there was

business and life was "good." He then dropped the bombshell. He had been the Jewish community's Shabbos goy, turning on a light or lighting a candle when it was needed.

On the spot where the shul once stood is a blue and white striped structure built by an Israeli firm in the 1960s. The company tore down the shul in order to build the new structure. However, on the opposite corner stood a small building with a big Coke sign, and Bourhan said that building resembled the structure of the shul building. Bourhan then explained that the streets around the shul had been wholly Jewish and the Jews dominated the economy. He recalled the kosher butcher shop and that Mordechai's father was a mattress manufacturer. We then entered a furniture store to be told it had been a Jewish house once upon a time. We also saw a huge house that had a Magen David on its façade. When we asked about a cemetery, Bourhan took us to the small "Christian" cemetery, which has a small Jewish section that is walled off.

Unfortunately, despite a concerted effort and speaking to many people, we didn't succeed in finding even one photograph of the people who once comprised the Djibouti Jewish community.

What about Meshe/Mordechai, you might ask? According to Ali, his friend Mordechai went to Israel and became a "general." On our return home we searched for an Adenite general named Mordechai but came up empty.

**Good for the Muslims?** When we asked Ali Aref Bourhan about the present state of the Muslim world, he was bitter about the extremism overtaking it. "It never used to be like this," he said, speaking about the women who walk outside in full Muslim regalia, with covered faces. Bourhan, who said he is against the radicalization of Islam, which he feels is destroying his country, is also against other foreign influences that can be seen throughout Djibouti. As we drove by one of the only big modern buildings, the new parliament, whose construction was financed by Iran, he referred to it as "Iranian Poison." China



1. Without any of its own natural resources, Djibouti's saving grace is its strategic port on the Red Sea

2. The milk might have been from a camel, but at least the fruit was identifiable

3. Ali Aref Bourhan, former president and Shabbos goy, with portraits of his grandfather — the Bey of Djibouti — and great-grandfather

4. This house was Yitzchak Shamir's hideout while in Djibouti

5. Ari G. investigates the qat plant in the shuk

6. This house, with the Magen David still on its façade, was built by the Benin family when Jews were a significant force in Djibouti's population



No one had found even one photograph of the people who once comprised the Djibouti Jewish community



At the local market, we were the ones that stood out

Moshe Sion's father was Djibouti's chazzan, mohel, and shochet. "There he was king. Here he was nothing"

is represented by the recently built "People's Hall" for cultural activities. There are also a number of Saudi- and Qatari-built mosques and madrassas, as well as a huge, empty, high-end housing development built by Dubai businessmen, which nobody is buying. In the shadow of all this building by foreign powers, Bourhan remembered fondly how, when he was president, an Israeli Navy ship came loaded with something that was truly needed by the new nation: Uzi rifles.

At one point during our visit it occurred to us that an Uzi might come in handy for us, as well. Before we go to any country with security concerns we do try to do our homework beforehand, so we will be safe, but it's impossible to plan for every situation. And so as we strolled through the outdoor market we were alert but not particularly suspicious of a very congenial, shirtless, and muscular African fellow who started following us. After a while he introduced himself as a worker in our hotel and said he had seen us there. We schmoozed and he told us about his two young boys. Soon we were discussing bris milah — in Djibouti, the vast majority of the men are circumcised, and we

explained that we would like to meet a Muslim mohel to discuss his technique and see his instruments.

Our interest in meeting a mohel stemmed both from our being involved in milah in Israel and from an ancient Djibouti tradition. The modern country of Djibouti is composed of several traditional African tribes. The main one in the north is the Afar tribe, also known by the derogatory name of Danakil. The dominant tribe in the region of the capital is the Somali tribe, also known as Issa. But Ali Aref Bourhan also told us about a smaller tribe known as the Galhadu tribe in Djibouti and as the Yibber across the border in Somalia, whose members are the sole mohalim in Djibouti. The local tradition is that Yibber is Ivri and that they were originally Jews who were converted to Islam. Before 1948 they were embarrassed about their heritage, but today they are proud of their Jewish roots. However, they are not interested in converting to Judaism.

But getting back to the outdoor market, our African fellow ended up taking us on a wild goose chase, in 120 degree weather, to find a mohel. Finally he said that the mohel would be in his

apartment. Why we agreed to go there we can't explain, but go we did.

We entered a dirty cement apartment building and followed the man up the stairs from one floor to the next. By the time we got to the top floor and saw our guide walking down the narrow hallway to the last door, we were having second thoughts and whispering, "Let's be ready to run!" Finally we arrived at the man's apartment, where we were immediately struck not by a concealed weapon but by a huge panoramic view of the ocean it afforded. There was no mohel waiting for us, but after a few minutes an old religious Muslim man came in. We discussed milah, with the translation being done by our host. When we finally got the chance to ask the elderly man about his instruments, his response was, "What instruments? All I use is a knife."

**The Last of the Djiboutians**

We didn't meet any *frum* Jews while we were in Djibouti. Not long ago, though, when we were back in Israel, we paid a visit to Shalom Sion's uncle, Moshe Sion, a *frum* 90-year-old widower who was born in Aden, spent his early years in Djibouti, and today lives in Bat Yam.

He fondly recalled the good life his family had had in Djibouti, where his father had been the Jewish community's *chazzan*, mohel, *sofer*, and religious authority. "There he [his father] was a king. Here he was a nothing," the elderly Sion told us, sorrowfully recalling the difficulties of being a new immigrant.

Shalom also connected us with another member of his family, his sister Rina, whom we spoke to from her home

in Tel Aviv. She related that her grandfather, Yosef Moshe, was the rabbi of Djibouti, a post that was filled on a strictly voluntary basis. He earned his living as a goldsmith, and served the Jewish community, which numbered about 100 souls, as a *chesed*. If a bris needed to be done in Addis Ababa, he took the train, did the bris, and returned all the way by train. But he took no money for the mitzvah.

Moshe Sion still recalls the day that Djibouti's Jews folded up their tents, so to speak, and brought an end to the life of this short-lived but apparently pleasantly lived Jewish community. "One day a plane came from Aden and we all got on." Their destination, of course, was the newly established State of Israel, where a very different kind of life was awaiting them.

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