

In a Dark Basement in Bulgaria

When Dr. Ari Greenspan embarked on a trip to Sofia, Bulgaria, his immediate focus was the present: performing a bris milah, working with the local youth, and leading a Shabbos of outreach. Yet a chance visit to a dark basement room unveiled an unbelievable collection of artifacts that bespoke a rich and vibrant past. It took hours of work and much power of persuasion, but Sofia's hidden genizah has now been cataloged and is on display — an exhibit of megillos, sifrei Torah, ceremonial objects, and clothing that is both staggering and moving in the message it silently conveys

Dr. Ari Greenspan with Dr. Ethan Schuman

Few experiences are as moving as personal encounters with our ancient customs practiced in unusual or unexpected locales. But when I visited Sofia, Bulgaria, to lead a youth program, I stumbled on a hidden treasure trove that took even a seasoned traveler like myself by surprise.

Bulgaria, located on the Black Sea, is part of the Balkans; it's just to the north of Turkey, which serves as the gateway to Europe from Asia and the Middle East. Jews have lived in Bulgaria as early as the Destruction of the Second Beis HaMikdash. In fact, a beautiful third-century mosaic floor featuring a menorah was found in the city of Plovdiv, as well as an ancient commemorative Roman pillar mentioning a "Joesphus archiesynagogus" or "Yosef, the head of the synagogue." Clearly there was a well-established and developed Jewish community in Bulgaria way back when.

The Romaniote Tradition Prior to the Middle Ages, the Jewish community in Bulgaria was a mix of Turkish Jews and a little-known group called the Romaniotes, the Greek-speaking Jews who had been living in Greece since ancient times. Romaniote oral tradition recounts that the first Jews arrived in Ioannina (Yannena), Greece, shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE.

The Romaniotes, living under strong Greek influence, developed their own "minhag Romania," whose roots and

halachah are based on the Jerusalem Talmud and which is considered one of the most ancient of the European Jewish traditions. Mostly centered in Greece and on nearby islands like Thebes, Corfu, Rhodes, and Cyprus, the Romaniotes spoke Greek and a Judeo-Greek dialect called Yevanic, written in Hebrew letters, as opposed to the Sephardic Ladino, or the Ashkenazic Yiddish. They are a totally distinct group from the Ashkenazim or the Sephardim, both of whom rely on the Babylonian Talmud as their source of Jewish law.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Bulgaria was part of the Turkish Empire, and for that reason the Turkish Empire in general, and Bulgaria in particular, were earmarked by Spanish Expulsion exiles searching for a safe haven in 1492. Rabbi Yosef Karo, the author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, escaped the inquisitors as a young boy by fleeing to Portugal and from there to Bulgaria. He married the daughter of the chief rabbi of Bulgaria and then moved to Eretz Yisrael.

Such a large influx of Sephardim changed the predominant customs of the community from Romaniote to Sephardic. The common language spoken by the elders there until just recently was Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language used by Sephardic communities, much in the way Yiddish is used in the Ashkenazic world. It actually was quite exciting recently to finish Musaf one Shabbos while in Sofia, and then to listen enthralled as the entire minyan sang *Ein Kelokeimu* line by line, alternating between Hebrew and Ladino.

Who could have imagined the treasure hidden in the basement? A glimpse inside a moldy crate containing some damp *sifrei Torah*. The wooden *eitz chaim* on the bottom scroll has an ivory handle accented by a complicated inlaid artistic circle

When her mother came home, instead of smiling at the surprise her daughter had prepared, her face clouded with anger. “Why did you cut my father’s tallis to put it on the table?” she yelled

It seemed like something from a fairy tale, a “pirate’s chest” filled with treasure. A closer look revealed a crate filled with Torah crowns, about forty pointers, and multiple silver *rimonim*



Unlike the rest of Europe, Bulgaria actively protected its Jews from the Nazis; there were no deportations of Bulgarian Jews. In 1948, almost all of Bulgarian Jewry made aliyah to Eretz Yisrael, leaving behind only a few thousand Jews. During the period of communism, the many small, ancient Jewish communities withered and, as their shuls closed, the communist authorities collected the Judaica and stored them away someplace.

Today, the Romaniotes are virtually nonexistent, as they were absorbed into the Sephardic communities, but Kehila Kedosha Janina, a shul built in 1927 by Romaniote immigrants to the United States, still exists in Chinatown on the Lower East Side of New York City.

Bris Milah for Old and Young in Bulgaria In 2007, Dr. Ethan Schuman and I were sent by the JDC to Latvia to perform brisim for fourteen uncircumcised Jewish adults. While there, we were asked if one of us would come to Sofia, Bulgaria, later in the year. I had already been invited to come and teach in Sofia as part of a youth weekend with 400 young adults from all over the Balkans, and the trip was timed perfectly with the birth of a Jewish baby boy whose parents wanted him to have a bris. A local fourteen-year-old who had never had a bris wanted one as well. The baby was unique

in that while his great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother all spoke Hebrew and had ancient Sephardic roots going back to the expulsion from Spain, the great-grandfather and grandfather weren’t even Jewish.

The grandmother looked at me and asked, “Don’t you find it unusual that despite being intermarried we all speak Hebrew and want to do this bris on time?” She then told me an amazing story: In the 1930s the baby’s great-grandmother was a young girl. Her mother had gone out to work. She wanted to surprise her mother, so she cleaned the apartment and cooked dinner. She could not find a tablecloth, but she did find a large old piece of cloth on an upper shelf of the closet. She spread it on the table, but it was too large, so she trimmed it to fit. When her mother came home, instead of smiling at the surprise her daughter had prepared, her face clouded with anger. “Why did you cut my father’s tallis to put it on the table?” she yelled. Her young daughter asked her, “What is a tallis?” At that point her mother realized that she must inculcate in her daughter the Judaism that her daughter did not have. That event stamped such an indelible mark on this family that despite being intermarried, something unfortunately common in Bulgaria especially during communist times, they managed to transmit a love for Judaism through the generations, via the women. The

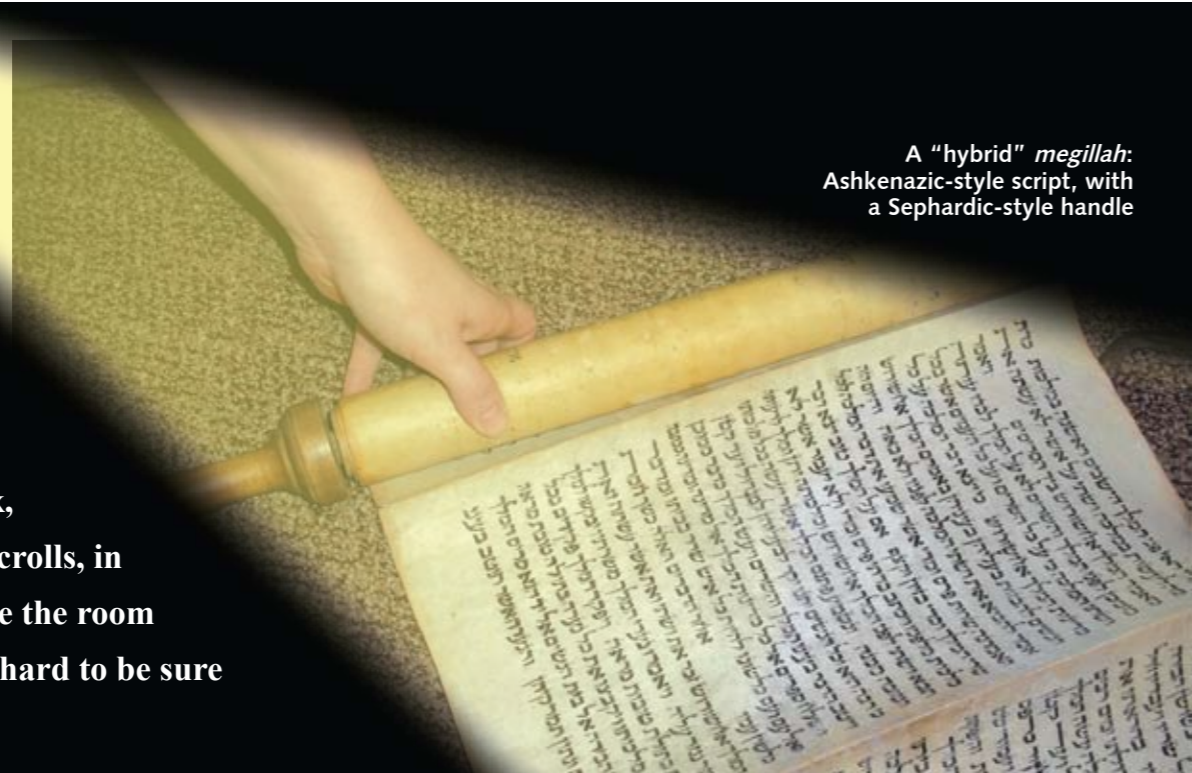


Touching history. A stack of ancient Torah scrolls, with typical thick Sephardic-style parchment

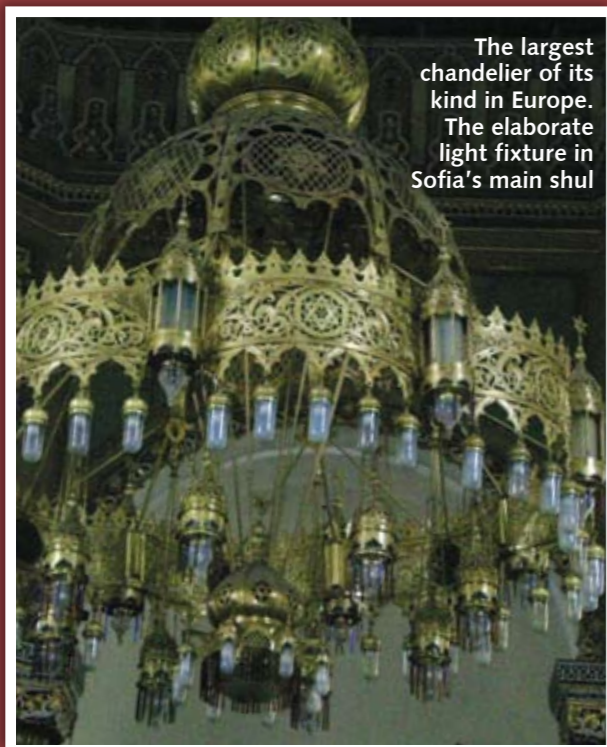


Traditional Sephardic *megillos*, with finely crafted spindles serving as handles

When I opened the door, I thought I saw a *paroches*, covering for the ark, holding the Torah scrolls, in the corner. But since the room had no light, it was hard to be sure



A "hybrid" *megillah*: Ashkenazic-style script, with a Sephardic-style handle



The largest chandelier of its kind in Europe. The elaborate light fixture in Sofia's main shul



The newly restored *heichal* in Sofia's main shul

mother of this baby married a Jewish man, and because of an incident with the baby's great-great-great grandfather's tallis nearly 100 years before, this bris was held on time. It was the first such event in Bulgaria in seven years!

The Lost Genizah Bulgaria's Jewish community has two active shuls. Sofia's main synagogue is a spectacular building built exactly 100 years ago. It has a huge dome and an expansive main sanctuary. Despite there being close to 5,000 Jews in the country, most of whom reside in Sofia, there is barely a daily minyan in the main shul for Shacharis and Minchah. Recently, a young rabbi, Rabbi Avraham De Wolff, moved in to lead the community.

On my trip, I met Rabbi Bechor Kachalon, the Israeli rabbi who has traveled back and forth to Bulgaria for twelve years. Rabbi Kachalon sensed my interest in recording and preserving the history of Jewish communities across the world, and showed me a room with some very old seforim.

Imagine my surprise when I found some books dating back to the 1700s. Looking around the rest of the building, I decided to search a bit more. I made my way downstairs into a dark, low, damp brick hallway and saw a room with a rough hewn wooden plank door. When I opened the door, I thought I saw a *paroches*, covering for the ark, holding the Torah scrolls, in the corner. But since the room had no light, it was hard to be sure. I took a picture with my digital camera. When I looked at the image on the camera, I saw a beautiful *paroches* among bags that looked like junk, and three very-large wooden crates that had sort of collapsed upon each other due to dampness and weight.

Surely these weren't ordinary boxes; they deserved a second look. So I made my way over to the boxes to see what I might discover. I couldn't see in the top box, so I stood on my tiptoes, reached up and took another picture of the inside of the box. I was amazed when my camera screen displayed images of Torah scrolls that appeared to be very old.

Next, I picked up one of the plastic bags surrounding the boxes and heard it clink. When I took the bag out to the hallway where the light was better, it proved to be full of Torah crowns. My suspicions were confirmed: I had accidentally stumbled across a forgotten *genizah* containing the combined Judaica of all the communities of Bulgaria that had survived both World War II and communism. I believe it was one of the largest finds since the war years. The collection had been forgotten in a dank, dark, dirty room in the

basement of this shul, and if not for my determination to keep sleuthing, I wonder if anyone would have found it.

As I went through the extensive collection, I was amazed and moved at the quantity and historical import of the items it contained. The lost *genizah* included close to 200 ark coverings! We also discovered 120 *rimonim* for *sifrei Torah*, Torah crowns, breastplates, thirty ancient *sifrei Torah* written on thick, dark-brown parchment, close to thirty pointers, menorahs, *tzedakah* boxes, a circumcision knife, some spice holders from the 1700s, hundreds of books — some 250 years old — and close to sixty *Megillas Esther* scrolls. To say that I was shocked and stunned is an understatement.

The collection also included Turkish Jewish Shabbos and holiday clothing. Later that week, while running a Friday night explanatory *tefillah* and Shabbos dinner for the young adults, I made Kiddush from an ancient cup and the young women wore the clothing that their great-grandmothers might once have worn.

We also came across little yellow Star of David buttons that the Nazis had forced the Jews of Sofia to affix to their clothing.

But though I found the collection to be a staggeringly important find, nobody else seemed to understand its importance.

I made three trips back to Bulgaria to try to organize the items, the last with Dr. Ethan Schuman. He and I spent close to thirty

column. The need for an “*amud*” is based on a *gemara* in *Bava Basra* (13) discussing a *sefer Torah* and how it is disrespectful to “wrap” a *klaf* (parchment) of Torah, Neviim, and Kesuvim on itself. It is a matter of *kavod*, honor, that the *amud* should do the wrapping, not the parchment. Since a *megillah* scroll has many of the same laws as a *sefer Torah*, it also needs an *amud*.

However, the exact definition of that “*amud*” is not universal among Jews. The Rema, writing for the Ashkenazim, understands the term “*amud*” the way scribes use it, to denote a column of parchment. It is for this reason that Ashkenazic *megillos* conclude with an empty column of parchment.

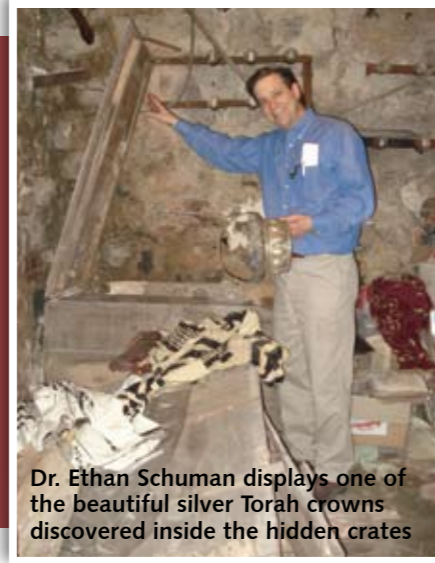
The Sephardim, however, understand the term “*amud*” to literally refer to a column or beam, hence the wooden spindle characteristic of all Sephardic *megillos*.

The story is told that Rav Ovadia Yosef, *shlita*, was once given an Ashkenazic *megillah* to read from. He refused to use it for lack of a wooden *amud*, as is the Sephardic custom. He then noticed a broom leaning in the corner of the shul. Wrapping the *megillah* around the handle to create an appropriate *amud*, he then began to read from it!

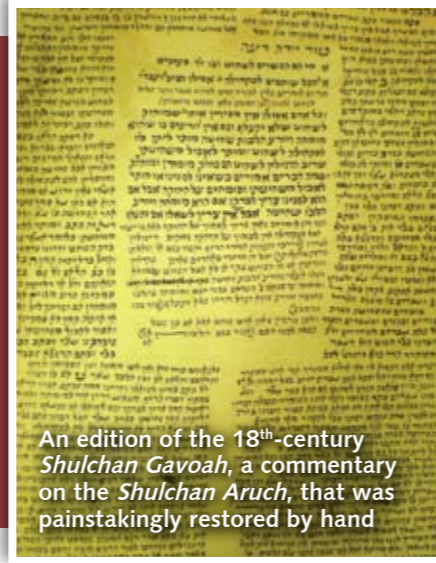
That anecdote came to mind and echoed with historical significance in the dark Bulgarian basement, when we located one Ashkenazic *megillah* (identified as such from the style of the



Fragments of a rich and vibrant past. Several of the 60 *Megillas Esther* that were found in the basement, positioned atop the crates that sheltered them



Dr. Ethan Schuman displays one of the beautiful silver Torah crowns discovered inside the hidden crates



An edition of the 18th-century *Shulchan Gavoah*, a commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*, that was painstakingly restored by hand

hours cataloging our finds. When I finally brought in the supervisor to see it all, he was flabbergasted, and acted to make sure that the local Jewish museum would take responsibility for displaying and caring for these priceless artifacts.

The Bulgarian Megillos Some of the most interesting items in the lost *genizah* were the *megillos* and *sifrei Torah*. All of the *megillos* and *sifrei Torah* were written in Sephardic script. In general terms, the difference in the fonts used for *sifrei Torah*, *megillos*, *tefillin*, and *mezuzos* is that the Sephardic letters are rounder and flow a bit and the Ashkenazic letters are squarer. It is for this reason that an Ashkenazic *sefer Torah* requires a slightly longer writing process, as the *sofer* has to make multiple strokes to form a “square” letter while a Sephardic scribe can use a sweeping motion to produce the same letter.

Another interesting and curious difference between Ashkenazic and Sephardic *megillos* is that a Sephardic *megillah* is traditionally wrapped around a wooden spindle that is sewn onto the end of the *megillah*. It is such a common sight that we never even question the origin of the custom. In fact, it’s an application of a little-known halachah in *Shulchan Aruch*. Rav Yosef Karo mentions in *Orach Chaim* 691 that a *megillah* must end with an “*amud*,” a pole or

script) that had been affixed to a twig. It seems that at some point in history, someone had sewn a simple twig of wood onto the end of the scroll. Why would a rough natural twig, not polished or even smooth, be sewn onto the end of this parchment? We could only surmise that this particular Ashkenazic *megillah* made its way to Sephardic Bulgaria sometime in the last 200 years. As a *megillah* from Ashkenaz, it had no *amud* as the Sephardim require. Somebody of Sephardic descent must have wanted to use this *megillah* and so an *amud* was sewn into the end so that it could be used according to the Sephardic rite in Bulgaria.

We live in a world of small or dwindling Jewish communities along with thriving, growing communities. Often we forget that the Jewish People were once widely dispersed into thousands of modest-sized communities. Yet despite it all, our customs and traditions flourished wherever we lived. The glimpses of those customs — be they proudly practiced or hidden in dark basements — is what makes our journeys so thrilling and moving. ■

Dr. Ari Greenspan is a dentist, mohel, shochet, and sofer living in Efrat, Israel. Dr. Ethan Schuman has the same credentials, and lives in St. Louis, Missouri. Together, they study minhagim (customs) and masoros (traditions), of Jewish communities around the world.