

Uzbekistan matzoh making unmasked

Like other *kehillos*, Bukharan Jews had their own distinct ways of making matzos. Six weeks before Pesach, Ari and Ari set off for Uzbekistan to find out if the age-old secret had survived almost a century of Soviet rule — and if, of course, it was still possible to have a taste

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY Ari Greenspan and Ari Zivotofsky



OUT OF SIGHT AND LONG FORGOTTEN an old matzoh oven lay hidden in a room overlooking this Samarkand courtyard



“IN EVERY GENERATION AND

generation they arise to destroy us and Hashem saves us from their hands.” Although it was not yet Pesach, we were reminded of those words from the Haggadah before we set off for central Asia and a halachic adventure in Uzbekistan. A few days earlier an attack on the Israeli embassy in India heightened security concerns across the Jewish world; in this region that is uncomfortably close to Iran and Afghanistan those concerns were especially high, particularly among the Israeli diplomatic corps.

However, our welcome to the country set the tone for the entire trip. We were greeted at the airport by our friend, the Israeli ambassador to Uzbekistan, who had come personally to pick us up. This was to be our experience throughout our stay — in every town the local Jews went above and beyond simple *hachnassas orchim* in their warmth and hospitality.

But why go to Uzbekistan? This backward country has been home to the community known as Bukharan Jews for many centuries, but as with so many out-of-the-way *kehillos*, many of its traditions are in danger of being forgotten. If we could not uncover and record all of those traditions there was at least one that we couldn't pass over. That, of course, was the secret of their matzoh baking.

Shalom, Samarkand Uzbekistan, a country with a rich ancient history, was one of the main stops on the Great Silk Road that brought precious commodities and wealth from China in exchange for European gold. Jews have lived there, according to some traditions, since the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. Some of the lost Ten Tribes of Israel were certainly exiled to this region, and the Jews of Bukhara, the Uzbekistan province that gave its name to the entire region's *kehillah*, have been there since the Second-Temple period. Samarkand, the country's second-largest city, has had a Jewish community for many centuries. Benjamin of Tudela, the 12th-century Jewish explorer,

described visiting Samarkand, which he called “a great city” in Persia, in which 50,000 Jews lived. The Jewish community was headed by a *nasi* — at the time of the Jewish explorer's visit the *nasi's* name was Rav Obadiah — and it included wise and very wealthy traders.

For most of the 20th century, Uzbekistan was part of the Soviet Union. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union 20 years ago, Uzbekistan has been an independent country whose population is more than 90 percent Muslim. However, the government, which keeps close control over the country, has made concerted efforts to keep out Muslim fundamentalism, including maintaining tight borders that prevent infiltrations from neighbors such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan. In addition, a recent law instituted by the country's Muslim president bans muezzins in the mosques from using loudspeakers; thus, the calls to prayer are done modestly, as was done for centuries, by a person calling out from the mosque. All this has helped to create a stable and peaceful environment. In fact, we strolled with our *yarmulkes* showing everywhere, happy to respond to “*salom alekem*” with a congenial, “*aleichem sholom*.” When we discussed with some of the locals the cordial relationship between the Jews and Muslims, they told us that indeed the Muslims were familiar with the Jewish calendar, and when they noticed the weather changing in the spring, they would comment jovially to their Jewish neighbors that Pesach must be around the corner.

We spent only one night in Samarkand, but it was an eventful one since we arrived on the eve of a traditional memorial service, which is known by the locals as a *yushvo* (a Judeo-Tajik term derived from the Hebrew *yeshivah*). Before our trip Professor Alanna Cooper of Boston University shared with us a chapter from her soon-to-be-published book *Bukharan Jews and the Dynamics of Global Judaism*, in which she makes an extremely perceptive and important observation regarding the *yushvo*. She had seen that many of the men in the synagogue were familiar with the *davening* and knew at which parts to respond and what actions to perform, yet it was clear that most of them didn't say most of the words and certainly didn't understand the actual content. This is not surprising when we remember that they lived under the repressive Soviet regime for close to 80 years, a time when there were no Jewish schools, when there was at most one official shul per town, and when any public display of religion was banned.

How then do these Jews still know anything about formal ritual? Prof. Cooper explains, “This sort of knowledge can only be taught and learned through modeling, watching, and interacting.” Where did this take place? The Soviets were able to shutter and bulldoze the synagogues, but they couldn't stop people from gathering in private homes for what appeared to be an extended family gathering yet was in fact a significant religious ritual. *Davening* therefore became intertwined with the *yushvo*, which was meticulously observed for every *yahrtzeit* and became an important part of these Jews' social and religious life.

Accompanied by our Hebrew translator, Tamara, we were led to



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1. FERGANA FRIENDS
Ari G. (r) with Fergana's *shamash* and Rabbi Birnbaum



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2. FAMILY HEIRLOOMS
These *rimonim* were just one example of Uzbekistan's hidden treasures



3.

3. TZEDAKAH TRADITIONS A Bukharan shul's *tzedakah* box



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4. FOOD FOR THOUGHT
This centuries-old matzoh oven was used to store *seforim*



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an unkempt courtyard in the old city of Samarkand, which led in turn to a small low-ceilinged room swathed in old Persian carpets. The only light came from a weak, naked lightbulb. Twelve men, almost all single or widowed, sat around tables arranged in a U shape, which were laden with drinks and pickled fruits and vegetables. The hot food, in huge quantities, was yet to come.

The event is primarily for men, and on this night the lone woman present was Tamara, who sat in the back and helped in the kitchen when she wasn't translating for us. This *yushvo* was smaller than what had been customary in the past, due to the small number of Jews left in Samarkand. However, the ritual was performed as it has been for centuries. The evening began with Minchah, followed by a series of readings that no one understood. Yet everyone participated, and even though most were without siddurim and couldn't recite the davening, they stood and sat and gestured at the appropriate junctions. Our host then described his departed mother, whose hand-painted photograph was displayed prominently on the wall. At the end of the service Kad-dish was recited.

Due to its central role, in former times the *yushvo* was held not only on the *yahrtzeit*. During the shivah week it was a nightly event and during the year of mourning it was observed each month on the day of the

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month that the person had died. During the Soviet era it was also held throughout the first month of mourning on the day of the week that the person had died. It may have not been a conscious way to hide religious activity from the Soviet government, but it was certainly effective since it became the method to transmit both prayer and the religious lessons that were included in the speeches that followed Minchah.

The next day we were invited to speak to a group of about 50 potential *olim* at a Jewish Agency-sponsored afternoon tea. At this monthly event people eligible for aliyah get together to learn about Judaism, and the Land of Israel, and to understand the aliyah process. The event reminded us of the gatherings of the 1930s, about which we had read. Yet after our short talks, which were about Jewish history and halachah, a woman with a mouthful of gold teeth stood up and, in words that were part plea and part demand, implored us in Hebrew to have a rabbi and *shochet* sent to Samarkand. She said that is what they really want and they feel neglected by world Jewry. She was neither the first nor the only person we met during our stay who expressed such yearnings.

Where's the Matzoh? These first glimpses into the Uzbekistan *kehillah* were moving, but they didn't make us forget a



A SAMARKAND YUSHVO: both the memory of the deceased and memories of ancient traditions are kept alive



OFF THE BEATEN TRACK: a matzoh oven found in the Fergana valley

prime reason we had come — the matzohs. We knew there had been a unique tradition of matzoh baking in this part of the world, but when we asked the Israeli ambassador if we could observe it, his reply was discouraging. He told us that he had investigated the subject and that there had been one family in Bukhara that knew how to bake matzohs in the Bukharan tradition, but they had moved to Brooklyn last year. Now there is nobody who knows.

We were disheartened by this news until we recalled that, in the language of the Talmud, "Israel is not a widow." There is always somebody to carry on the tradition. We just had to find them.

In the meanwhile, we felt like we were kids allowed to run about freely in a candy store, since there are so many opportunities in Uzbekistan to discover traditions and ritual artifacts. On the prior Motzaei Shabbos we found ourselves in the courtyard of a dwelling presently inhabited by three generations of one family. The walls of the family's house were lined with photographs of previous generations of Torah-observant ancestors. That love for Torah can be found today in the family's 23-year-old grandson, who has been serving as a functionary in the shul since his bar mitzvah and was the *shaliach tzibur* for many of the Shabbos *tefillos* when we were there. His grandfather had studied with a private *rebbe* during the Soviet era, until his *rebbe* was exiled to Siberia. The grandfather had inherited several religious items from his father, including *rimonim* for the Torah and an old *Megillas Esther*.

After seeing these treasures, we asked if the family had any old tefillin. The grandson excitedly told us that of course they still had them and proceeded to fling open one old wooden cabinet after another. When he finally found them, the truth was that they excited us less than something else that we saw behind one of those doors. There, in front of our eyes, was a stash of unique Bukharan matzoh-baking equipment that had been used for generations. It hadn't dawned on him that those old, simple implements would interest us.

We excitedly asked him to explain how each tool was used, and he readily sold us a few of the "reddlers" (hole makers) and pans that were among the finds. It seems that in the previous generation, when the region was overflowing with Jews, every family baked their own matzoh and thus they all had the necessary equipment. An old adage says that there is no smoke without fire. We therefore deduced that there are no matzoh-baking implements without a matzoh oven being nearby. So where was it? The grandson told us that the oven, which was built into a wall, was located in an upstairs room. Sensing our excitement, he then added that not only was the room virtually inaccessible but there was no light in it, making a nighttime visit impossible.

The next day we returned to the family's home. In the morning light we saw that the grandson had not misrepresented the situation. The only entry to the room was via a rickety wooden ladder, which we cautiously ascended. Unfortunately, the oven was no longer intact, but the search for it turned out to be not an entirely futile investment. Sitting inside what had been a matzoh oven for well over a hundred years was a huge stack of old seforim. We knew from experience that despite their



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age — most were as old, if not older than the oven — they probably weren't of interest, being run-of-the-mill siddurim and Chumashim. However, we bought them and when we got home we were delighted to discover that one was an older, rare printing of the *Shulchan Aruch*.

By Hand and Lishmah Today there are very few Jews who live outside the main cities, but one of the small communities still left in the countryside can be found in the distant valley of Fergana. There are only about 30 Jews left in the village of Fergana, yet they still manage to have a minyan on most Shabbosim.

When we arrived, the entire community came to welcome us. Tourists almost never come to this place that is truly off the beaten track, and we were moved by how happy and honored they felt that we had come to visit them. After we *shechted* some birds and gave a little talk, we asked if they had any questions. While their questions might seem basic to us, these devout but not knowledgeable Jews were very unsure and concerned about if they should take the Torah out of the ark if there was no minyan. Could they even open the *aron kodesh*? After clarifying that topic for them, they, like Jews elsewhere in the country, complained bitterly about not having the *shochet* visit regularly, like in the old days. Since it was just six weeks before Pesach, they begged for help with obtaining matzoh. In previous years their matzoh had been provided by the American Joint Distribution Committee, but they claimed it had not come the year before. We immediately called our contacts at the AJDC office in Israel, who assured us that a large supply of matzoh and wine was being sent in time for the holiday. After we left the group, we paid a visit to the home of the one person in the

village who spoke Hebrew. He was in his 30s and lived with his parents; his father was the shamash in the shul. When queried about matzoh, they too showed us their family's matzoh equipment.

In this part of the world, the wheat set aside for baking matzoh was often kept in a locked closet until it was time to grind it. The grinding was all done by hand and *lishmah*, so that the matzos would properly fulfill the mitzvah. What is unusual about their custom is that the Persian communities, of which the Bukharan Jews can be counted, would roll out very, very large matzos on the back of huge Persian metal pans. Traditionally this work was done by the women while sitting on the floor. When we asked about the oven, they told us they use a traditional Uzbeki bread oven that had been kashered. They then proceeded to take us to a Muslim courtyard to see one.

We knew that Iranian matzos, which are baked daily, are soft. We were therefore very surprised when the family told us that according to their memories their locally made matzos had been hard and were all made a week or so before Pesach. Was this perhaps an instance where the older traditions were lost during the long years of Soviet oppression?

A Taste, At Last While in Samarkand, we were able to get our hands on what we had been looking for. Nina, one of our hosts, graciously took us to a room in her home and showed us

her great-grandmother's matzoh-baking instruments. After we pleaded that seeing the implements wasn't enough, she consented to demonstrate the matzoh-making process.

First she took a very old metal bowl and put in the flour. Next, she grasped a large, hand-forged sort of soup ladle, which was clearly between 100 to 200 years old. Her great-grandmother had used this ladle for only one purpose — to pour the *mayim shel-anu* (the special water that had been kept overnight and was used to make matzoh) onto the flour that had been kept under lock and key until it was time to bake her matzos.

After rolling out the dough on a smallish pan, due to the size constraints of Nina's modern gas oven, we used her great-grandmother's rusty old *reddler* to make the holes so that the dough wouldn't rise. The dough was then baked in Nina's modern oven, but she insisted that, other than its smallish size, the matzoh was exactly what their traditional matzoh looked and tasted like: It was very thin and crispy and quite tasty. From an old wives' tale that we were told, it is clear that they too used to pine for the taste of matzoh. We are all familiar with the Yerushalmi's injunction against eating matzoh on Erev Pesach, which in some families now extends back to Rosh Chodesh Nisan or even Purim. While our tradition offers no consequence of violating the prohibition, the Bukharans told us that in their tradition, if one ate matzoh on Erev Pesach, all their teeth would fall out!

Our journey to Uzbekistan has ended, yet we both agree that eating matzoh on Leil Seder will now have an added depth of meaning. While today obtaining matzos is easy for most of us, for our ancestors, fulfilling the mitzvah of matzoh required great effort and energy. But it was baked with so much care, love, and devotion that every generation fondly recalled both the taste and the process, and passed on those memories to those who came after them. For no matter where they lived and what difficulties they faced, every year each *kehillah* and *eidah* sanctified Pesach by making kosher matzos according to their precious traditions and unique customs. ●

1. MATZOH MAKING, UZBEKI/PERSIAN STYLE Rolling out the dough

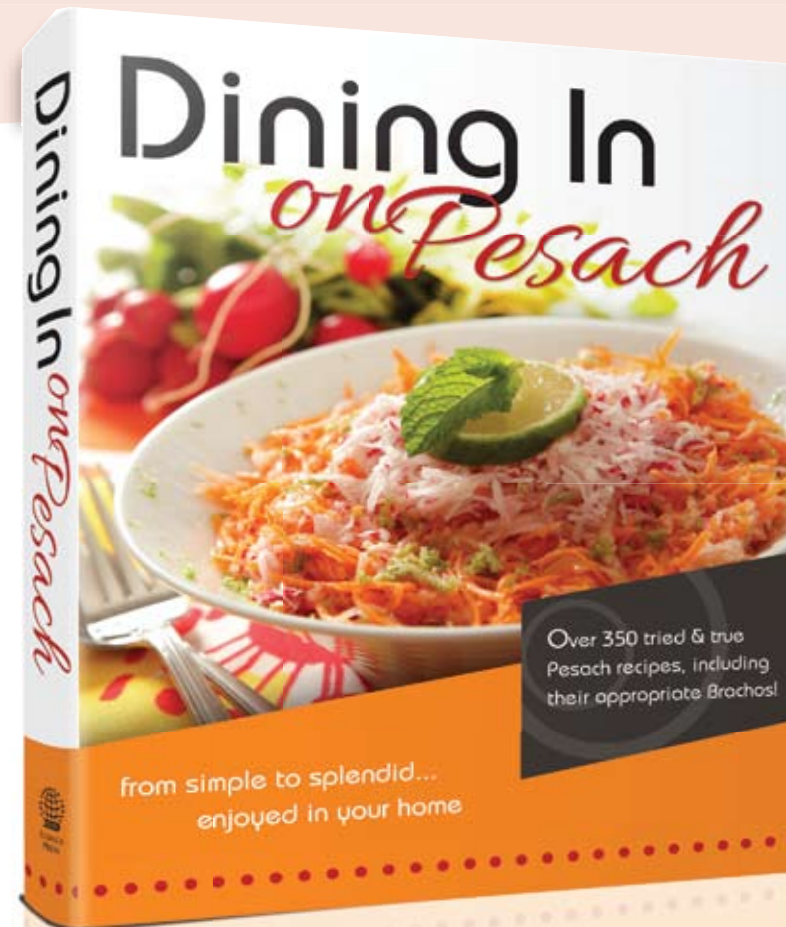
2. READY FOR THE REDDLER The dough is perforated using the family's antique reddler

3. TASTE OF TRADITION Uzbekistan matzoh

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