

The Remnant of the Eritrean Jewish Community  
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We recently took a trip to the Eritrean capital of Asmara, a city situated on a plateau on the northwestern edge of the Great Rift Valley, to explore the remnants of the Eritrean Jewish Community. To the best of our knowledge, at the time we were there only two other Jews were in the country: the new Israeli consul and his young wife. What Jewish community could have existed in such a remote and isolated location and what history could we expect to find? Looks can be deceiving and while the community of Asmara was not ancient, it was, in the not so distant past, a small but exceedingly vibrant one.

There remains living here for most of the year one pious Jew, Mr. Sami Cohen, now in his early 60s, who enjoyed and fondly remembers the heyday of Asmara Jewry and ensures the upkeep of the synagogue so that anybody can walk into it any day of the year and daven. And indeed we did just that one day this past Tammuz. We arrived in Asmara late one night after literally an entire day flying. Although Asmara is less than 1000 miles from Tel Aviv, there are very few flights to this poor, backwards country, arriving only from Cairo, Sana'a, and Jeddah, and thus we were required to fly via Frankfurt and Jeddah, in a 17 hour trip. Locals later told us that Air Eritrea, currently non-operational, will be back and running once its two planes are repaired! After arriving in what can only be described as the lowest tech international airport in the world and sleeping in a quaint Africa-Italian city, we found ourselves the following morning in a fully functional shul, lacking only a minyan. It was clean, well-lit, stocked with siddurim and other required books, two sifrei Torah, all being taken care of by Sami.

We had met with Sami in Israel prior to our sojourn, and while Sami was not in Eritrea when we visited, his presence was constantly apparent; whether it was in enabling us to gain access to the shul, obtaining kosher food, or arranging housing details. He cares for the shul like it is his own home. The non-Jewish woman he employs to clean and care for the shul has been doing it like it was her own abode for over 45 years. Sami told us: "I remember what this community was like when I was child. We had schools and social programs and lectures. It was vibrant and beautiful." Everybody we talked to, from the lady in the printing shop to a boy in the internet cafe knows and respects him. He is a true kiddush Hashem.

What kind of Jewish community existed in this place? Among the earliest Jewish inhabitants of this city situated 7000 feet above sea level with a beautiful climate, were the Behar brothers, Uriel and Nissim, who came from Constantinopoli in 1890. They started a business that grew to become one of Eritrea's largest export firms. As the Jewish community grew, they realized there was a need for a shul, and in 1906 Uriel, first president of the community, requested and received from the Italian authorities, then the rulers of the country, a plot of land on which to build the synagogue. Because it was for religious purposes it was given free of charge. Construction began immediately. About 1/3 of the allocated land was used for the shul, with the rest serving as the school, offices, mikveh, and yard. As Sami said: "there was a Jewish school in the compound of the synagogue. We were lucky to have a teacher who was giving us lessons on holidays, afternoons, all age students." Recently a 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary event was held for the shul to which many former members returned.

**The Jews of East Africa**

Most of the Jews in Asmara were not from Constantinople, but rather from Aden, and Eritrea was not alone in having a Diaspora Adenite community. The eastern coast of Africa had a little known chain of Jewish communities that began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and reached their peak in the 1950s and 60s. Starting from north, there were Adenite kehillot in Asmara and Masawa, Eritrea; Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa Ethiopia; Djibouti, Djibouti; Mogadishu, Somalia; and Nairobi, Kenya. These communities were predominately made up of Adenites from south Yemen who came to Africa starting in the late 1800's to seek their fortunes, and who were later joined by Sephardic Jews and still later by Ashkenazim escaping from Europe.

When we traveled to Ethiopia in the 1980's with the purpose of assisting the Beta Yisrael, known then by the pejorative term Falasha, we were pleasantly surprised to discover that there existed in Addis Ababa an Adenite community complete with a shul, a minyan, and kosher food. In fact on one of our trips, we were able to shecht chickens for some of the people as there was no shochet there at that time. Back then we had also learned about the Eritrean community, but due to the then active war between Ethiopia and Eritrea we were strongly discouraged from visiting Eritrea. The memory of those meetings stayed with us through the years, and when Ari Greenspan was in Ethiopia for Yom Kippur two years ago, he discovered that a shul still existed in Asmara, Eritrea, and we decide to go and explore the roots and remnants of that congregation.

Aden was the strategic southern Yemenite port, controlling access to the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean. Jews have probably lived in Aden for well over 1000 years. In 1839 the British Empire, seeking to protect their Far East trade routes conquered this little town of 600 occupants and a 75 square mile area around it and for the first time since the Mohammedan conquest, Jews living on the Arabian Peninsula had equal rights. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the nature of the community was no longer like their simpler northern Yemenite Jewish neighbors, but more cosmopolitan and educated. Iraqi, Indian, and even some European Jews joined the existing community. Even a number of meshulachim from Israel visited there in the mid 1800's. At its peak, the community numbered over 8000 Jews. While sitting in shul in Addis Ababa on Yom Kippur in 2007, Mr. Felix was telling Ari Greenspan about the 2000-year-old cemetery in Aden. He looked him in the eyes and said "I was born in Aden and my parents came here when I was a little boy almost 70 years ago, see my eyes, they are blue and my skin is not dark. My family was descendant of the Spanish exiles and not Yemenites". While economically and socially they were initially like their poorer northern cousins, they soon developed business acumen and edged their way into a new world. The confluence of Yemenite religious piety and learning together with European cosmopolitanism, created a unique community and culture.

Following the European colonization of much of the horn of Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Adenite Jews sensed opportunities and began doing business along the eastern African coast and moved their families to be with them. This was the beginnings of the Asmara kehilla, in the then northern Ethiopian province, and since independence in 1991 the independent country of Eritrea. Sami Cohen's family has followed the path of the Adenites. Hailing from Aden for many generations, his grandparents moved to the Eritrean port of Massawa at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the 1921 earthquake they moved with their family to Asmara where they lived for many years. Now the family is scattered to Israel, England (Sami has a British passport), and Italy, where Sami's immediate family resides.

Asmara had been a small village for much of history, until, under Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia, it began to develop in the 1870s. It acquired importance in 1881, when a market was founded there and further importance in 1884, when it became a regional capital. This caused the

population to explode from an estimated 150 people in 1830 to 2,000 in the late 1880s. The development of modern Asmara began with the Italian occupation in 1889, Asmara formally becoming an Italian colony on January 1, 1890, and Eritrea becoming the national capital in 1897. In 1936 Eritrea became a province of Italian East Africa. The British defeated and expelled the Italians 1941 and took over the administration of the country and administered it until 1951, when it became part of Ethiopia. Eritrea is strategically important due to its mineral resources and its Red Sea coastline, which was Ethiopia's only sea access.

The Italians began a feverish building campaign in Asmara in the 1930s, resulting in Asmara being known as Little Rome and by the end of the decade over half the population 100,000 was Italian. A good deal of the city was built in the late 1930s as part of Mussolini's plans for a second Roman Empire in Africa.

A short walk around the center of town reveals the Italian flavor of the city and the ghosts of the Jewish community. The wealthy businessman Banin built the main shul, which celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2005, when he moved to the community. The synagogue is a beautiful building with a typical Sephardi sanctuary and a small balcony for the ezrat nashim. The aron kodesh still holds two sifrei Torah in their Sephardi wooden cases which are occasionally used. For example, a minyan happened to be present on Shabbat Zachor two years ago and both Torahs were read from. Like many north African Shuls, there were a series of Tzedaka boxes built into the side of the bimah designated for various communal needs. Asmara was no exception, and among the various slots were several labeled: The poor of Asmara, the poor of Jerusalem, Rabbi Meir Baa Hanes, and so as not to forget the folks back home, "the poor of Aden".

There is a mikveh in the shul compound that still has water in it, although it is not very clean and it has probably not been used in years. The mikveh has two side-by-side pits, an otzar for the rain water and an immersion basin where the person dunks, and one can still see the pipe from the roof where the rainwater drained in. A number of rooms open up to the shul compound and they were used as the local Jewish school where all members sent their children. Chickens used to be slaughtered in the compound and larger animals were slaughtered in a slaughter house around the corner. Initially the people were mostly Adenites along with some early members from Constantinople, but Yemenites were soon brought in as teachers, mohalim, and shoctim. There were a fair number of Italian Jews and in the late 1930's a few European Jews escaping from the Germans made their way there as well.

A large house that was built by the prominent Banin-Mansour family and owned by Shoa Menachem Joseph, president of the community from 1916 until his death in 1965, is presently a hotel, known as Pension Milano. Sami advised us to visit the building and see the many obvious indications that it was previously a Jewish residence. The most obvious evidence that it was a Jewish house are the artistically designed plaster Magen Davids in the ceilings and stained glass Magen Davids on the windows. From our perspective, the most significant testimony of a Jewish presence was the doorways, where the marks from the mezuzah locations and nail holes are still clearly evident. We could not help but feel the spirits of days past and wondered what smachot had occurred in these walls? What songs had echoed in the hallways when the zemirot were sung and the Torah learned? What community meetings were held in this house and what decisions were taken that affected the lives of all the members?

We have a particular interest in how matzot were prepared around the world. Like almost every small Jewish community, for the last several decades all matzot have been imported. However Sami Cohen still has an oven in his backyard. "I remember when my mother would bake matzot

here, but since 1950's we have imported them from Israel. In recent years it was used only for challot.”

### **THE 400 ISRAELI PRISONERS**

There is a fascinating Israeli connection to Asmara as well. The Italians were defeated in 1941 and the British administered the city from 1941 to 1952. In 1944, at the height of anti-British Irgun activity in Israel, the British were getting frustrated in their attempts to guard difficult prisoners on Israeli soil. The British hit upon an idea similar to how they had used Australia centuries earlier, and that was to send the prisoners far from home and make escape and support from home difficult. In October 1944 in a swift, surprise move known as "Operation Snowball", in the middle of the night 251 of the toughest Irgun and Lechi fighters were taken from Latrun Prison and whisked away by plane to Asmara. In those days with limited air travel, it was really isolated. Much like the American camp in Guantanamo bay, Cuba, the “Jewish Terrorists,” of whom the British were petrified, were taken without notice and sent to desolate Africa to be held without a trial or time limit in Sambal Prison in Eritrea and for shorter times in Carthage, Sudan and Gilgil, Kenya. Later other prisoners were added, bringing the total to over 400. During the 20 months that the camp was in existence about 12 prison breaks occurred. Among those shipped to Sambal prison camp in Eritrea was former Prime Minister Yitzchak Shamir, the commander of the then feared Lechi. The powerful and dynamic story of these men is told in a book, *Long is the Road to Freedom*, by another former prisoner, Yaakov Meridor, Menachem Begin’s number two man and father of Dan Meridor, a current minister in the Israeli government. He escaped or attempted to escape several times from camps in Egypt, Asmara, Addis Ababa, and South Africa. He finally succeeded in returning to Israel and landed there on Independence Day in 1948. The British may have succeeded in isolating the prisoners from their Israeli comrades but they forgot to take into account that there were local Jewish supporters. The Jews of Asmara, Addis Ababa, and Djibouti helped the escapees by providing food and shelter. Meridor’s book reads like a suspense novel and is a must read for anybody interested in that time period. The building in which they were incarcerated is still used as a jail, and thus we were only able to see it from a distance. In the 1950's during the era when the state was trying to cope with waves of immigrants and food was scarce, Mr. Meridor opened a kosher meat canning factory in Asmara, and shoachim from Israel worked there providing meat for the young country and its army.

### **Jewish cemeteries:**

Adjacent to what must be the smallest zoo in the world, located just outside of the Asmara city limits, we saw the well-manicured British cemetery from WWII. The cemetery contains about 7 graves of Jews who died fighting with the British against the Italians. The country is extremely poor and that is evident in a zoo that contains nothing more than a few birds, guinea pigs, and the big attraction, hyenas.

Like all Jewish communities, the Eritrean Jewish cemetery tells its story. The cemetery is a separate section of the larger Asmara Christian Cemetery that had been given to the community when it started. In 1951 the municipality wanted to relocate the graves and use the land for immoral purposes. A wealthy Jew, President of the community Shoa Menachem Joseph purchased the land on behalf of the community and to this day it remains in Jewish hands with the caretaker of the entire cemetery also looking after the Jewish section.

On January 17, 1946, in the Sembel camp Sudanese guards shot two Israeli detainees dead

after the prisoners broke down a gate in order to get to the hospital another detainee who had been shot. For unknown reasons the British refused to transfer the bodies for burial in Israel and so they were buried in the Jewish section of the Asmara cemetery and later re-interred in Israel after the establishment of the state. In recent years, as the community has dwindled, relatives have reburied several other bodies in Israel.

When we visited, the caretaker showed us to the Jewish section and we were permitted free reign to stay as long as we wanted. The earliest graves are from the very early 20th century and the most recent burial seems to have been in 1990. There is one section of obvious small graves belonging to children, from an era not long ago when childhood diseases claimed many lives.

### **Current status:**

In addition to Sami Cohen's business, several other Jewish owned businesses still exist. One of them is owned by Mr. Kanzen, an Adenite Jew who is more often found at his Addis Ababa office, who graciously gave us use of his house and had his manager, Mr. Fcadu, show us the city and share of his knowledge.

Why would such a vibrant community, with its own school, mikveh, shul, shochatim, mohalim, and Rabbis, a total of over 500 people at its peak in the 1950s, disappear? And indeed it has dwindled – the last wedding was 35 years ago, the last rabbi left in 1975, and the last funeral was over 10 years ago. Anti-Semitism was not one of the reasons. Although Judaism is not an officially recognized religion by the Eritrean government there is no history of the Jews there ever experiencing persecution. We did not sense any animosity towards us as Jews or as Israelis. Today Israel and Eritrea have full diplomatic relations, with an Eritrean embassy in Tel Aviv and an Israeli embassy in Asmara. We met the Eritrean ambassador in Israel as part of the visa process and he had only positive things to say about Israel. Regarding Eritrea he said: "Our country is developing and we have excellent relations with Israel." He volunteered to us that some things his government does may seem a bit harsh, but in typical communist double talk he told us "we know what is best for our own people." While in Asmara we visited the Israel embassy, not an easy task due to the multi layered security, and later had dinner with the new counsel and his young wife who had been in the country for all of two weeks. They seem like a capable young pair in an isolated assignment. How isolated? It is the only posting to which the Israeli Foreign Service is willing to ship food.

So what caused the exodus of the Jews? Some left to Israel for positive motivations when it achieved independence. But for most, it was the turbulence of the region and not personal choice that were the factors that caused them to emigrate. In 1961 the bitter civil war with Ethiopia, i.e. the Eritrean War for Independence, began after Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia. It was then that Jews began to leave Eritrea. An ongoing series of battles over the years that at times reached all the way to Asmara caused the Jewish emigration to increase in the 1970s. The peak of the emigration was in 1975 when many Europeans fled due to the nationalization of private factories and property, and the revolution. The fighting, coupled with dictatorships and rigid communism were the proximal causes of the dwindling of the community. Even Sami Cohen's family had had enough, and in 1998 they moved to Italy.

Visiting a community like this is bittersweet. On the one hand it is sad to see such a beautiful history and yet an empty shul. What little there is today is unfortunately unlikely to remain in a decade or two. However, many of the people did make aliya and this represents another piece of kibbutz galuyot in our generation, something Jews have dreamed of and hoped for for the last 2000 years.