

the MIX

Mishpacha

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ON SITE

Bridges in the Gulf

What compelled Abu Dhabi, the conservative Muslim capital of the UAE, to rescue the last few remaining Jews of Yemen? While there hasn't been a trace of Jews in these parts for 600 years, perhaps it has to do with the country's newly-established Ministries of Tolerance and Happiness. Whatever the reason, we were there to meet them



Abu Dhabi,

capital of the UAE (United Arab Emirates), is a conservative, religious Muslim country boasting a spectacular royal palace, a luxury hotel where all things drip gold (including 24-karat edible shavings on the coffee), a grand mosque that holds over 41,000 people, and stores selling camel milk chocolate. Yet it was recently instrumental in a dramatic, out-of-the-spotlight operation: saving the lives of the last Jews of Yemen.

It was a bittersweet chesed on the part of the Emiratis, as it essentially turned off the lights on the 3,000-year-old Jewish community, the oldest in the Diaspora — ending the ancient Jewish presence in Yemen for good.

We spent a week in the Persian Gulf, visiting and baking *shemurah matzah* with Jews in Kuwait, Bahrain, and Dubai. But our visit to Abu Dhabi would be a bit different — our main goal in visiting Abu Dhabi specifically, was to spend time with these very last Jews to leave Yemen and learn about their life and their customs.

Each of the Emirates has its own character. Dubai, as we found, is consistent with its reputation as Western, cosmopolitan, and flashy, with less of a flavor of local traditional culture. Abu Dhabi, on the other hand — a mere hour away by car — is more sedate, traditional, and conservative. As in Dubai, there is an emerging expat Jewish community as well as Chabad, but Abu Dhabi also has this small but tenacious Yemenite Jewish community.

Cancelled Plans



not even that this replanted Yemenite community is continuing a chain, because there aren't many indications of a former Jewish community anywhere near Abu Dhabi — although the 12th century Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela did report of a Jewish community in the town of Kis, which is in the modern Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. That community seems to have long ago disappeared, although a lone tombstone with Hebrew writing from about the 15th century has been found in the area, possibly of a Jewish trader. (He also recorded the area's famed pearl diving industry, the area's key industry for centuries prior to the discovery of oil reserves.)

Life in Yemen for Jews was always tough and precarious and Yemenite Jews were tenacious in their adherence to tradition despite centuries of persecution. All males wore *peyot*, which they called "*simanim*," "signs" that proudly identified them as Jews. But with a status of second-class citizen, or *dhimmi*, in the Muslim world,

they were less protected and were at the mercy of the local populace. The hatred of Jews and the rigid form of Islam practiced in much of Yemen translated into a dangerous life of deprivation and fear.

In the 12th century, the Jews were threatened with forced conversion and turned to the Rambam for advice. In response, in 1172, he wrote his celebrated epistle to Yemen (*Iggeres Teiman*) where he encouraged: "Remember, my coreligionists, that on account of the vast number of our sins, G-d has hurled us into the midst of this people, the Nation of Ishmael, who have persecuted us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us... No nation has ever done more harm to Israel."

Later, in 1679-80, Yemenite Jews suffered the traumatic Exile of Mawza, in which all the Jews were banished from the cities and sent to live (and for many it meant to die) in the desert. In the modern period, life continued to be punishing for a Jew in Yemen, yet despite it all, they persevered and faithfully transmitted Jewish tradition.

The two of us have been veritably

obsessed with Yemenite Jews, and pined to visit Yemen ever since we learned shechitah when we were in yeshivah from our Yemenite teacher, Jerusalem chief shochet Rav Sasson Gradi. Even then we found the Yemenite Hebrew, with its unique pronunciation, difficult to understand, yet it spoke to our hearts. It's a remarkable Jewish community, hewn from its semi-detachment from the main body of the Jewish people. The constant oppression kept them insular, and as a result their traditions and minhagim remained untarnished.

We finally got serious about visiting Yemen in 2008, and as we prepared for the trip, Ari G. spent six months growing a beard and *peyos*. Not wanting his patients (he's a popular dentist in civilian life) to know what was going on, he used gel to glue the *peyos* up under his yarmulke.

At the time, a Jewish State Department officer who had been stationed in the

A long-abandoned, 1,000-year-old Jewish community in Sana'a, Yemen. We'd planned to visit where there was still a viable community in 2008, but the brutal murder of the kehillah leader made us reconsider our plans



American embassy in Yemen told us that we should go to the town of Raydah, the last bastion of Jews, with about 250 Jews at the time. We were instructed to go to the market on Thursday and ask for a person named Moshe al-Nahari, a young Hebrew teacher and butcher and the de facto head of the community. We were to tell him that we wanted to be with him for Shabbos and all would be okay. But just a few weeks before our trip, there was a spate of violence against Jews in Yemen. A Jew was accosted in the market and ordered to convert — a threat the Jews of Yemen knew all too well — and when he resisted, he was riddled with bullets. Four days later, a grenade was thrown at the house of another Jew in Raydah. The news of the murdered Jew and further violence made international headlines. His name: Moshe al-Nahari. That ended our plans to visit Yemen — but it didn't end our desire to connect with its Jews in real time.



REAL-TIME RESCUE



With the generous help of Abu Dhabi leaders, the remaining Yemenite families are gratefully living in safety... and comfort. We were happy to take up their generous offer of lunch, and if you don't know, nothing matches authentic Yemenite chicken soup and fresh bread baked on the oven wall

The overwhelming majority of Yemenite Jews were airlifted to Israel in 1949-1950 in Operation Magic Carpet, on flights flown on Alaska Airlines planes along with their pilots. Only a few hundred Jews remained behind and they slowly trickled out during the ensuing decades. Since around 2000, a few dozen Jews left Yemen with the help of the Satmar *chassidus*, but between 40-50 remained. Some of them had not seen or spoken with their parents or children since they left 20 years earlier to go to Israel, the US, or

England.

A number of years ago, the lives of the few Jews still in Yemen were threatened. In order to protect them, the then-president of Yemen gathered them in Saana, the capital, and put them into guarded housing. With the subsequent and ongoing civil war and the overthrow of the government by the extremist Houthis, they were no longer under protection and their situation was precarious.

When their plight was brought before Rabbi Berel Lazar of Russia and Rabbi Elie Abadi of Dubai, they made it their mission to bring it to the attention of the

government in Abu Dhabi. A decision at the highest levels was made to help these Jews, and in an operation whose details are not fully public, they were brought to Aden in south Yemen and from there flown in private planes to Abu Dhabi. (According to our host, there are actually still six Jews and one sefer Torah left in Yemen.) There are today four Yemenite-Jewish families — three of them from one extended family — living in Abu Dhabi. The government was not just helpful, but generous. He gave them houses, cars, a stipend, and the prized permission to live in the UAE.

Family Ties

We wanted to meet these newcomers to Abu Dhabi and document some of their ancient minhagim. We contacted the head of the extended family in Abu Dhabi, Yichye, and he mentioned that he was coming to visit Israel. Yichye is a *talmid chacham* who is very concerned about preserving the Yemenite traditions and passing them on to his children and to other Yemenite children.

After meeting him in Jerusalem, Yichye invited us to his home in Abu Dhabi, and a month later, here we were. We schmoozed about his personal situation and about the challenges of raising *frum*, educated Yemenite children in a Muslim country with a tiny community and limited Jewish schooling options. It was interesting to see the merging of various worlds: Yemenite, Western, Muslim, Gulf. We watched as Yichye provides *chinuch* for his *peyos*-clad son in the old-fashioned Yemenite manner. We observed them sitting while the little boy practiced reading in Hebrew. Yichye sat with a small twig, the type that had been used in Yemen from time immemorial, as a switch to snap against the young student's hand. Yichye used it more as a pointer, though, and he held it more for tradition's sake. His wife Esti is Yemenite but grew up in London and speaks the Queen's English. Yichye's single sisters, young women, were dressed modestly in the style of traditional Jewish Yemenites.

As a teenager in 2007, Yichye was sent from pre-civil war Yemen to Israel to study in yeshivah. In 2014 he visited his sister in London, and there was introduced to Esti who would become his wife. She is also Yemenite but spent her formative years



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with the Satmar community in London. Yichye spent the next seven years in a Satmar kollel in London.

In the meantime, still in Yemen were his parents and sisters in Sanaa, and his older brother Yosef in Raydah. Yosef twice spent time — a total of nine months — in a squalid Yemenite jail where he was beaten and stabbed for the crime of having been in Israel. For many years, Yichye tried, unsuccessfully, to get the rest of his family out of Yemen, but they could not reunite until Abu Dhabi made that possible.

Our hosts had prepared a sumptuous feast and we were looking forward to tasting their spicy food and hearing their story. But first, a little game of Jewish geography. We were delighted to learn that Yosef Hamdi, Yichye's brother who lives nearby with his wife and four children, is good friends with Rav Yehudah Machpud, the grandson of the great Yemenite leader and shochet, Rav Shlomo Machpud, with whom we have become friendly over the years through our halachic adventures. We quickly sent a picture of us with Yosef to Rav Yehudah in Israel, who within minutes responded with an old photo of himself together with Yosef. We laughed about what a small Jewish world it is as we dug into a home-cooked Yemenite lunch. Yosef is the local shochet, having learned shechitah in Israel, and provides the small community with chicken and lamb. While we were only there for a short time, the family welcomes guests and even rents out bedrooms.



As per Yemenite tradition, Yichye uses a snapping twig — but only as a pointer to help his young son follow the words. (Below) His brother Yosef spent nine months in a squalid Yemenite jail for the crime of being in Israel

Easy as Pie

We wanted to learn about authentic Yemenite customs, and Yichye's family — whose *mesorah* hasn't been diluted — was a great place to start. As we'd already spent a week baking matzah in other UAE emirates, we were particularly interested in how the Yemenites bake their unique soft matzah. We have been privileged to bake matzah with Israeli Yemenites, including Rav Shlomo Machpud himself, but were looking forward to see it from, literally, the last Jews of Yemen. Plus, as per Yichye's request when we'd earlier met him in Israel, we even brought the *shmurah* matzah flour.

We were excited to learn that we'd come at the right time — just in time for the family's matzah bake. The oven, located in their small backyard surrounded by stone walls, is not what we are used to with a flat surface on which the matzah is placed. It is more like a metal tandoor with the fire on the bottom heated by wood; its thick walls absorb the heat to help in the baking of the matzah that is smacked onto the inner surface of the vertical walls.

Once the wood has turned into glowing coals, the flour and water are mixed, and, as per their ancient custom, salt is added. The ratio of water to flour is much greater than for standard hard matzah, and this very wet dough takes only two or three minutes to thoroughly knead.

Due to its wetness, it will stick to dry hands, and thus Yemenite Jews are the only community to practice the next step, which the Gemara describes and is explained in the Rambam (*Hilchos Chometz U'matzah* 5:12) and *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim* 459:14-15): Two bowls of water are used, one to cool your hands so the heat from your hands after exposure to the oven does not cause the dough to rise faster and become chometz in less than 18 minutes, and the second to moisten your fingers so that the dough doesn't stick to them.

We watched as Yichye's younger sister took about a third of the dough, painted it with a little *hilbe* (fenugreek, which Ashkenazim treat as *kitniyos*) so that it would stick to the oven wall and bake properly. She then put it in the palm of her hand and put her hand into the open oven and smeared the dough onto the wall of the oven. With her hand still in the



As the matzah dough bakes quickly on the round oven wall, Yichye hurls the hand-rinsing water against a wall where it seeps into the ground. An ancient halachah with a modern twist

super-heated oven, she stretched the dough out and gave it the desired shape. When Ari G. later tried this, he burned his hand, and the matzah fell off the wall. (It became abundantly clear why they need a bowl of water to cool their hands before working on the next matzah.) While the sister was dealing with the oven, Yichye's mother was constantly jiggling the bowl with the rest of the dough. The sister quickly took the next piece of dough and repeated the process.

When the matzah was finished, it was removed from the wall completely baked through and through, with no unbaked pockets even though there were no holes made in the dough.

The whole process takes six to seven minutes, significantly faster than the 18-minute maximum — which explains why they don't set a stop watch the way Ashkenazim do. Only a few matzos are made from one batch, each was the size of a medium-sized pizza pie and contained about ten *k'zaysim* (olive-sized portions).

Then, before making a second batch, Yichye took the water used to wet and cool the hands, walked a few feet away and said to us, "We have a custom to throw the water on the wall." As he threw the water against the garden wall, it rolled down and went into the earth. We were amazed — because here was an ancient custom and yet is practiced nowhere else. This is likely based on the Rambam (*Hilchos Chometz U'matzah* 5:16) and *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim* 459:16) that the water should be spilled on an inclined surface so that it does not gather and become chometz. Whether or not they knew the sources, this is what the Jewish women of Yemen, who traditionally baked the matzah, had transmitted from mother to daughter for untold generations — creating the authentic soft matzah possibly made the same way since the Exodus from Egypt.

Other than the Yemenites, since nobody today uses water to cool or wet their hands, this halachah has been lost to much of the Jewish world. Yet for Yemenites, making sure there is no water around with even a suspicion of chometz is extremely important, as they bake fresh soft matzah every day of Pesach, when the prohibition of chometz is in full force and there is no possibility of *bittul* as there is before Pesach.



While the locals rave about it, there's no way to make this camel milk chocolate into *chalav Yisrael*

FIT FOR A KING



our new friend Yichye told us that, as good Emirati tourists that we were, we must go and see two things with him: The first was the mall, with its spectacular spice market owned by an Iranian. This is where Yichye goes to buy incense for his home and to enjoy some of the spices and scents of his birthplace in Yemen. While in the spice shop we did a double take: Featured prominently in the middle of the store was a stand featuring "Al Nassma — first and finest camel milk chocolate."

Al Nassma was founded in Dubai in 2008 and today sells and markets worldwide. On their "Camelicious Farm," they have over 3,000 camels that are milked twice daily, providing around 5,000 liters of raw camel milk. Some of that is bottled and sold as Camelicious milk, with the rest made into chocolate in Austria. The picture of this non-kosher chocolate looks delectable. In discussions of *chalav Yisrael*, it is sometimes mentioned as a side point that milking camels — whose milk is obviously

not kosher — is also not financially worthwhile, and as expected, the camel milk chocolate is much more expensive than its bovine counterpart.

The second must-see was the king's palace, part of which is open for visitors. When we think of the extravagance of the palace of King Achashverosh, we each have our own vision. But no matter how you stretch your imagination, the palace of the king of Abu Dhabi is more spectacular. Known as the Qasr Al Watan, this magnificent 380,000 square meter complex was built between 2010 and 2017. The grounds are huge, the entrance to the massive domed building is immense and the gardens in this desert are luscious and exquisite. The entire flooring and walls are made of intricately inlaid marble of many colors, and from the 120-foot diameter ceiling dome hangs a chandelier with 350,000 pieces of crystal. It also houses the royal library hearkening back to the time of the golden age of Muslim scholarship and science a millennium ago, with books on medicine and magnificently illustrated antique Korans on display.

SURPRISE CONNECTIONS



bu Dhabi, like Dubai, has a growing number of Jews from around the world who are coalescing into an emerging community, in addition to the small

Yemenite kehillah. We were surprised to discover a connection between this community and an old friend we'd met in Ethiopia some 35 years ago.

Back in 1987, we joined a mission to help the Ethiopian Jews. We spent the week in the Gondar region, but for Shabbos we were back in the capital, Addis Ababa. The country was under a cruel and vicious communist dictatorship at the time but we were told that Shabbos davening and meals were arranged with the Adenites, and that their houses were modern, warm, safe, and kosher. At the time, we had no idea what an Adenite was, and began to understand how little we knew about the Jewish world, something we have spent the next 35 years trying to make up for.

At the southern tip of Yemen sits the strategic port of Aden. Whoever controls Aden controls entry into the Red Sea and access to Egypt and Mecca, and, since the Suez Canal was opened, also controls the route from Europe to the Far East via the Mediterranean and the Canal. Aden was conquered by the Portuguese in 1513, the Turks in 1538, and Great Britain in 1839. When England took control of this then small but highly significant port, education, business and western practices made their way there. The Yemenite Jews who moved there found religious freedom — and ultimately British passports. They became the sophisticated cousins of the poor Yemenite Jews. If you call an Adenite Jew a Yemenite he'll take it as an insult.

Around the turn of the 20th century, many Adenite Jews crossed the narrows of the Gulf of Aden to the east coast of

Africa, where they founded active Jewish communities. It was one of these Adenite satellite communities, then still with a minyan, that we encountered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Among the people we met was Shalom Sion, a businessman and shochet. His house even had a mikveh built into it, a mikveh that was in use until very recently, and while he subsequently moved to England, to this day he continues to travel back and forth to Addis Ababa for business. It was a pre-internet time and although we traded contact information, we never kept up a correspondence. And then in 2018, when we were back in Ethiopia working on a case of *pidyon shevuyim*, we met Shalom again. He fished his little old-fashioned paper address book out of his pocket and showed us our names and 30-year-old phone numbers.

Imagine how amazed we were to come to Abu Dhabi and to discover that a leader of the nascent expat community, Daniel Seal, is married to the daughter of Shalom Sion, our friend from so many years ago in Addis Ababa. They run a small Sunday school and Shabbos davening, all under the protection of president of the UAE and Abu Dhabi ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (colloquially known as MBZ), and vice president and UAE prime minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Nothing can happen in the Emirates without permission of the government; but the government is attempting to be broad thinking and has created such ministries as a Ministry of Tolerance, a Ministry of Happiness, and a Ministry of Artificial Intelligence.

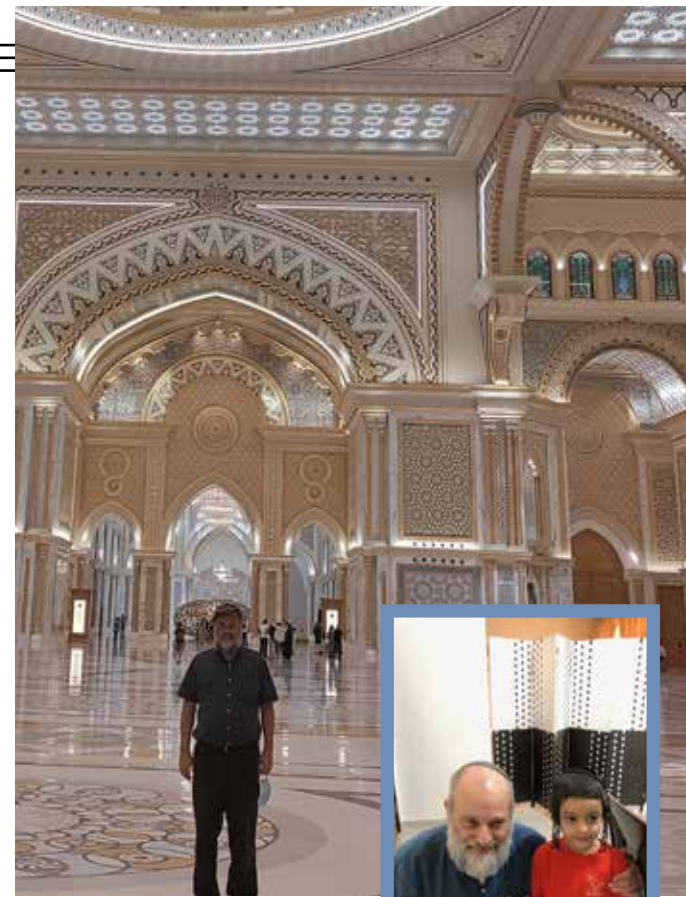
In 2010, New York University opened a campus in Abu Dhabi with the understanding that non-Muslim students would be free to practice their religion. As such, Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, then executive director of the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at NYU, began



MBZ hopes the Abrahamic Family House will bring tolerance and happiness to his subjects, despite their vast differences

traveling regularly to the new campus to provide services and support for Jewish life for the faculty, staff, and students who were there, and in 2019 he was appointed chief rabbi of the Jewish Council of the Emirates. He would walk around campus with a yarmulke and his tzitzis out.

In February 2019, Pope Francis became the first pope in history to visit the Arabian Peninsula when he participated in the International Interfaith Meeting on "Human Fraternity" in Abu Dhabi. This set into motion the process that led to the construction of the first purpose-built shul in the UAE. MBZ, who was then Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, announced that to commemorate the pope's historic visit, he would build a massive interfaith project which will include a mosque, church and synagogue. And they don't waste time: this unique and beautiful synagogue was already inaugurated a few weeks ago.



Deeds Matter

story of the Yemenite Jews' rescue and family reunification is a tribute to the leaders of the UAE. As Yichye said, Abu Dhabi has done a great chesed by arranging their rescues from war-torn Yemen and settling them in Abu Dhabi. These approximately 25 Jews spanning three generations are living in the UAE, ever-grateful for what their new country has done for them.

Abu Dhabi is a beacon of light in the Muslim orbit. Its people are religious and conservative, yet are open-minded and open to interfaith dialogue. And they have even built what they claim will be the most beautiful shul in the Muslim world. Words can be cheap; deeds matter, as the king himself has demonstrated, being directly responsible for saving the lives of these Jews stuck in Yemen and facilitating the reuniting of their families. Maybe this really is the beginning of an era of Tolerance and Happiness, as the new ministries portend.