





THE YEMENITES

Theories abound as to when Jews first arrived in Yemen; some date the Jewish presence back to First Temple times, others to the period after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. Still, large-scale immigration to Yemen (mostly from Palestine), does not seem to have occurred before the second century CE.

Until Islam spread on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, Judaism actually seems to have attracted many converts from the surrounding Arab population. Even Abu Karib Asad, the ruler of Yemen in the early 400's, converted to Judaism, bringing many other converts along with him.

After the arrival of Islam, Jews refusing to profess belief in Mohammad faced loss of land, property and status. Still, Mohammad had assured them freedom of religion—in exchange for payment of the taxes imposed on all non-Moslems. The Mohammedan laws for non-Moslems were always strictly enforced in Yemen, forbidding Jews, for example, to wear the same clothes as Moslems or to ride on animals. Jews were not permitted to own property—wealth was seen as incompatible with the status God had assigned to them. Suffering constant insults and abuse—forced to clean public bathrooms, and forbidden to testify in court—the Jews remained permanent second-class citizens in Yemen.

ZION OZERI



Above: Kindling for the family *taboon*, carried from a kibbutz a mile away.

Overleaf: Friends and family bearing a tray with the traditional henna dye, in the formal *Hineh* procession.



The Jews were restricted to certain occupations. Many became jewelers, weavers, silversmiths and shoemakers. As a result, a curious dichotomy arose: At the same time that the Moslems—mostly farmers—treated their Jewish neighbors as inferiors, they grew more and more dependent on them for various services.

Throughout the centuries of persecution, the Jewish community of Yemen by and large retained its connection to traditional Judaism. Study of Kabbalah became popular; belief in Torah and love for Jerusalem were central to Jewish education and practice.

This faith, coupled with the oppressive external conditions, led the Jews of Yemen to continue to dream of the Land of Israel and the return to Zion. Long before the 20th century, Yemenite Jews had been in contact with their countrymen in Palestine. There is evidence that some Yemenite Jews lived in Palestine as early as the 16th century, but the real beginnings of a substantial Yemenite presence in Palestine began in 1882, with a community numbering 200 strong. By 1908, their ranks had swelled to 2,500, with more Yemenite settlements being established there during the next few decades.

In Yemen, the Jews followed news of the creation of the State of Israel with great excitement. Their nationalist feelings grew, along with the belief that the Redemption was at hand and that the diaspora life of suffering and hardship was finally over.



The Yemenite government, interpreting Israel's military victories in 1948 as a sign from God, gave the Jews permission to emigrate. In 1949-50, Israel's Operation Magic Carpet flew almost all of the Jews of Yemen to Israel. Many, leaving for the pick-up point in Aden in great haste, were forced to sell their belongings at far less than their full value—but to them the important thing was simply to return to Zion. In spite of the fact that the road to Aden was long and often dangerous, with some even dying along the way, nearly all of Yemen's 50,000 Jews were successfully airlifted to Israel.

My family arrived in Israel through Operation Magic Carpet. Our story is typical of many Yemenite families.

Our first home was a tent that we shared with a few other families, in a ma'abarah (transit camp) near Kibbutz Ein Shemer. About a year later, we moved to another camp, in Ra'anana. This ma'abarah, a series of long wooden huts, originally had been a British army camp. Our family of nine (soon to become twelve) lived in a hut together with four other families. We occupied two

rooms, sharing the public baths and toilets with other residents of the ma'abara. My father built an additional room that we used as a kitchen. Gas and electric were, of course, non-existent, although a few electricity poles had been erected in the area. My mother built a woodburning taboon to bake our pita; we children played in what were supposed to be streets but were actually dirt paths between the rows of huts.

Difficult times forced my parents to work long and hard. The only job my mother could find was cleaning houses—and she felt fortunate to have even this work. Lack of modern skills and education forced my father, a locksmith in Yemen, to work in a nearby factory and then on a farm. While in his early 30s, he was injured at work. Due to inadequate medical care, he remained bedridden for more than a year, though his injury would today be considered minor. His right leg remained crippled because he couldn't get proper treatment and medicine.

In Israel, as in the old country, religion was the center of the Yemenite Jew's life. When I was three, my father started teaching me to read the Torah. He also sent me to a mori, a neighboring rabbi, for additional Torah instruction. By the age of five I was able to read fluently. As I got older, I would meet with my friends every day after school to read the weekly Torah portion. However, my first experiences studying Torah were

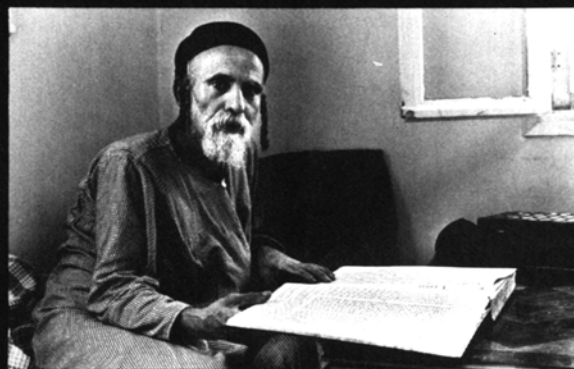
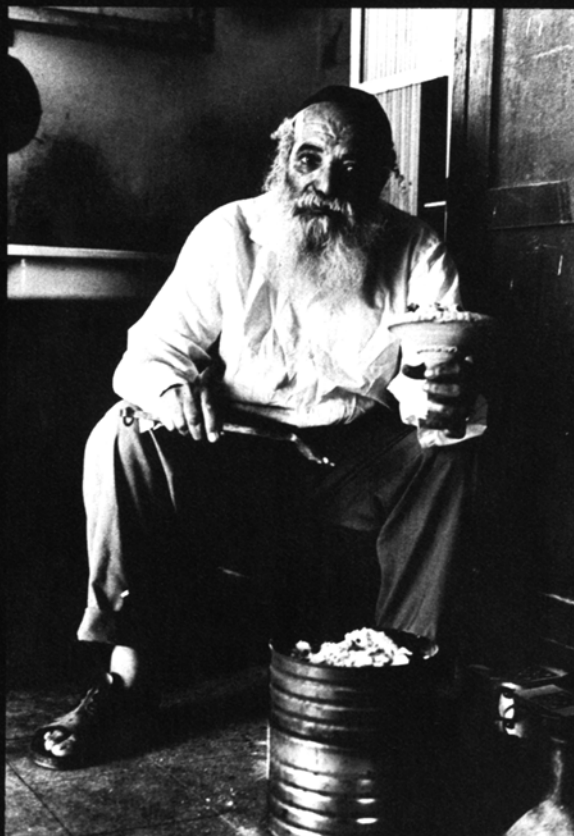
not all pleasant. The *mori* and my father each had a leather whip (*sauwt*), which they used whenever we children did not pay attention or made repeated mistakes. Unfortunately, I got to know the sound and feel of these whips quite well.

My friends and I all wore our hair in accordance with Yemenite Jewish tradition: heads clean shaven, long earlocks at the side. When I started public school and met non-Yemenite children, I suddenly felt different and self-conscious. My earlocks and shaven head became sources of much mockery from my classmates. Before long, my older brother took me to a barber, who cut off my earlocks. When I came home that afternoon, my father, of course, was angry—but in his heart he knew that there was little he could do. My haircut was just one more inevitable step away from the past.

Soon even my parents began giving up some of their old ways. A simple dress and kerchief replaced the *tarjoul* (pants worn under the dress) and the *gargush* (head coverings) that my mother and the other women had worn when they first arrived from Yemen. My father, too, accepted Western clothes, no longer wearing his *madani* (traditional men's pants) and *matsnaf* (traditional hat). However, some of their friends refused to give up the old ways.

The particulars of Sabbath observance also underwent change in our family as the memories of life in Yemen faded and the exigencies of life in immigrant Israel grew more and more real to us. The custom of reading the weekly Torah portion after the Sabbath meal, although not abandoned altogether, began to grow less common. It was missed by the parents—but less so by their children, for in most houses, the father had used this time to see how well his children has mastered their Torah lessons that week. But the father had another opportunity to check on his children's progress—during Saturday morning services, when the sixth *aliyah* was always saved for the children. Those who made mistakes when they were called to the Torah faced punishment from their fathers and ridicule from the other children—but those who performed well could look forward to respect and praise.

Although some traditions began to fade quickly, we still continued to gather for *Jaaleh*—a favorite with us children. On Shabbat morning, after a late breakfast, friends and family would gather at the home of whoever was celebrating a special occasion, such as a birth or a wedding, at the time. Special songs were sung and special foods served; it was a time of communal joy and celebration, which succeeded in imparting to the children the strong feelings of kinship and warmth that were a part of our Yemenite Jewish community.



Top: A *mori* during leisure time, preparing his water pipe.

Right: A family stall, which has since been closed, in the old market in Rosh Ha'Ayin.





Traditions and customs relating to weddings were also changing. Although my father was sometimes saddened by the changes, he was willing to accept them—he saw that he really had no choice. I remember hearing him talk with a relative who had a daughter of marriageable age, trying to convince him that the custom of *shart* (money paid by the groom to the bride's parents) was quickly becoming a thing of the past. My father's prediction was right; this custom has since been abandoned. In Yemen, all matches were arranged by the parents; in Israel, this was considered old-fashioned. The transition to the new way was simple enough most of the time—but there were always the occasional incidents when a young woman encountered problems trying to get out of a marriage arranged by her father years earlier.

In our community, a wedding was an occasion for prolonged celebration, beginning the Shabbat before the wedding (Shabbat al Bida) and lasting for seven days after the wedding. Along with the tradi-

tional wedding itself came the Hineh ceremony, a party replete with specific rituals, as well as an occasion for singing and dancing. In Yemen it had been customary for a newly married couple to live with the husband's family, so the Hineh developed as a farewell party for the bride as she left her parents' home. With the actual need for Hineh diminishing as the Yemenites become more assimilated into mainstream Israeli life, the observance of this and other rituals is slowly disappearing.

The distinct physical characteristics of the Yemenite Jewish tradition have also disappeared—beginning, in my family, with my first trip to the barber. As this brief history of my family and our friends has shown, we, the younger generation, growing up and going to school in a Western-oriented society, have abandoned most of our parents' customs in our effort to conform to our new surroundings. This photo-essay is my way of remembering and revering the vanishing customs, culture and way of life of my parents and grandparents—a heritage I have been taught to cherish, although I myself do not live as they did.

The traditions of the Yemenite Jews are part of Jewish history, although the Yemenite Jews themselves will soon cease to be an independent sector of the world community. The generation of my parents is, in many ways, the Last Generation. ★

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