

SEPHARDIC COMMUNITY ALLIANCE

QOL HA-QAHAL

קול הקהל

פורים
שמח!



Issue 45: Purim

IN HONOR OF MOE AND SYDELLE SHAMAH
BY THEIR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN



*In Honor of Moe and Sydelle Shamah
By their children and grandchildren*

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QOL HA-QAHAL MISSION

To promote Torah throughout our community
by providing a platform for our rabbis, lay members, students and institutions.

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PURIM

IDENTITY THEFT: ARE YOU PROTECTED?

Rabbi Richard Tobias

According to the Federal Trade Commission, 10 million Americans fall prey to identity theft each year. Fraudulent identities cause close to \$50 billion of financial loss annually and take exorbitant amounts of time to rectify. The increased use of the Internet for purchasing products and filing information has made cybercrime one of the most pervasive in America and around the world. Losing your identity, in this case, is like being deleted – the victim no longer exists.

Purim is the story of the Jewish people in exile, following the destruction of the first *Bet Hamikdash*. Having spent decades away from their home, Israel, Jews became comfortable in what should have been a foreign society. In fact, they had become so comfortable that our rabbis explain that they partook of and participated in the party of King Ahashverosh, celebrating, what he thought, was the sealing of the Jewish fate to never return to Israel. The rabbis, with their words, were describing the state of mind of the Jewish



to ourselves and what we stand for, proud of who we are, that others have respected us for our integrity. The same was true with the story of Purim. We became our own worst enemy in that we tried to be like the other, and so the

“...being Jewish means owning the privilege of having a constitution that preaches morality and sensibility and truth.”

people at the time – they were shedding their identity, becoming more and more comfortable in a world that defied their values and beliefs.

It was not until Haman decreed that the Jewish people would be killed *en masse*, that we began to realize the threat against us. How ironic, and unfortunate, that we had been the catalyst to our own fate. Looking back on history, however, it seems that it has nearly always been the case that the more the Jewish people try to shed their identity and fit in, the more society has spit us out. Our attempts to evade pariahdom have consistently back-fired, causing more ostracizing and banishing. It is only when we have been true

other tried to destroy us. More frightening and threatening to the outside world is when we try to shed who we are, than attempting to wave our flag and stay true to ourselves. That is the story of Jewish history.

In Egypt, writes the *Emek Davar*, we stopped doing *brit milah* because we wanted to be like the Egyptians, and we ended up in slavery. During the time of Hanukkah, we embraced Hellenism and then fought a gruesome battle for our lives. In Spain, we tried to shed our culture and adapt theirs instead, and we were oppressed. The greatest survival tool of the Jew is to hold dear to his persona. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “if Jewish survival is a problem, it

is because Jewish identity is problematic.” It is during the time of Purim, when our existence was threatened simply because of who we were, or, perhaps, who we were not, that we have to reiterate the message of Jewish identity. What does that mean and what does it look like?

To me, being Jewish means owning the privilege of having a constitution that preaches morality and sensibility and truth. It means being part of a long line of tradition, of people who searched for G-d and the meaning of life; who put their lives on the line for what they believed and knew to be true. It means to be open to the world but steadfast in my values and beliefs; to be intelligent and conscious and thinking and hopeful. Jewish identity is not just about what I wear and what I do. It is about who I am; an upstanding citizen who engages the world through the prism of Torah. To be a Jew means to struggle with the world’s problems and be a part of solving them. It is to share the word of G-d with those around us and impress upon them its brilliance. It is my greatest pride, my reason for being, the purpose of getting up in the morning. It is something for which I would put my life on the line because without it, I am dead inside anyway. I am a Jew because I want to be, not because I have to be.

As we face a world that increasingly threatens our Jewish identity and a political storm that puts Israel’s existence at its center, it is imperative that we stand proud of who we are. We live in a world where our children become more and more cynical of the very thing that has maintained their survival for thousands of years. It is a world in which the Jew continues to become the reason for all evil. It is not easy to be part of the nation that everyone loves to hate, but nothing worth having ever comes easy. We must teach our children to define, embrace and hold tight to their identity, lest it be stripped away by those fighting so strongly to make us obsolete. Consider, for a moment, what would have been had Mordechai and Esther not believed so much in themselves and the G-d above them that they would have succumbed to their world of pressure. What would have been had their identities been stolen? I shudder at the thought. As we celebrate another Purim, let us be proud of who we are, unafraid of what we believe, steadfast in our support of *Eres Yisrael*, and unwavering in our identity.

Rabbi Tobias is the Dean of Students at Magen David Yeshivah High School



The Tomb of Mordechai and Esther in Hamdan, Iran

DON'T FORGET!...

Rabbi Sion Setton

As the joyous holiday of Purim approaches, we are making our plans to congregate in synagogues or homes to hear the Megilla, make some noise when we hear the name of Haman and rejoice by holding festive meals and exchanging gifts. In the days leading up to the Purim festivities, we prepare in a variety of ways; our minds are focused on what *Mishlohei Manot* (gifts of food which we exchange on Purim) we will be giving this year and possibly what costumes and *groggers* we will use during Purim 2017. Those of us who are hosting *Se'udot* (formal celebratory meals) are busy preparing food, and those of us who are being hosted are thinking of how to contribute to the festivities.

I find it both inspiring and admirable that our Jewish communities celebrate the holidays with so much joy and energy. There is nothing that better symbolizes the victory of Esther and Mordechai than the vitality and exuberance with which we celebrate their heritage. However, I would like to suggest that just as we invest our time, money and

revive those with broken hearts."

– Misneh Torah, Halakhot Megilla 2:17

Because there are so many “material” aspects to the holiday, we may run the risk of focusing too much on the external aspects of the day and not enough on the ways in which we must relate to other people and to the spirit of Purim. Maimonides reminds us that giving to those in need is more important than how lavish or fancy or elaborate our *Mishlohei Manot*, costumes, or meals are.

This Shabbat we read *Parashat Zakhor*, the portion of the Torah which describes how the people of Amalek attacked the Jews while they traveled in the desert. One of the defining aspects of this episode is that the Amelekites acted with no compassion for the weak; they intentionally attacked the back of the Israelite camp, where the most vulnerable individuals were. On Purim, we mark our national salvation in a way wholly antithetical to that of Amalek, by reminding

“There is nothing that better symbolizes the victory of Esther and Mordechai than the vitality and exuberance with which we celebrate their heritage.”

energy preparing for the feasts, gifts and clothing for Purim, we should invest equally on the *Hesed*, the acts of kindness, which characterize the holiday. Regarding one of the four misvot of Purim, gifts for the poor, Maimonides writes:

It is preferable for one to be more generous with his/her donations to the poor than to be lavish in preparation of the Purim feast or in sending portions to one's friends. For there is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the converts. One who brings happiness to the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the Divine Presence, which Isaiah 57:15 describes as having the tendency "to revive the spirit of the lowly and to

ourselves that there is never true celebration of victory if we do not include in it every member of our society, including those less fortunate than we are.

May this Purim be a joyous holiday, filled with laughter and good will. May we celebrate with each other and be *zokher*, remember, the miracles that God did for our people long ago. May we give generously to those who need it and ensure that Purim is truly a happy holiday for all.

Rabbi Sion Setton is the Principal of Yeshiva Prep High School. He is the founding Chairman and member of the Downtown Va'ad and serves as an affiliate Chaplain at New York University.

MAQAM OF THE WEEK Sephardic Pizmonim Project, www.pizmonim.com

Dr. David M Betesh, DMD

On **Shabbat Zakhor**, *maqam SIGAH* is applied to the prayers. A practical explanation for this selection is because the majority of *pizmonim* for Purim, as well as the Iraqi chanting of *Megillat Esther*, are in this *maqam*. Another explanation is that in the days of Mordekhai, all the Jewish people repented and returned to the Torah

(Talmud Shabbat 88a). When it says in *Megillat Esther* that the Jews had “light”, this is specifically alluding to the light of the Torah. Therefore, to remember the great event and the miracles of Purim, *SIGAH*, the *maqam* used for chanting the Torah, is applied. *HAZZANUT: Semehim: Abarekh Et Shem Hashem, Naqdishakh: Eli Sur Yeshuati.*

קדיש ראובנים
 רם אור גדול
 בנה לי זכור
 יום הנצבת
 אנה קץ יי
 מהלל ל שורו
 אור זמני וגם קצי
 ל עושה נקמה
 אור גילה
 אדון עולם ישועתי
 אברך את שם אחני
 תם תם ונשלים
 רוננו גילו כל הברואים
 יק לי צור משגבי
 ילבקלך שכל ל למאס
 מאמרום קולם
 מנתת זשבת
 ואני תפילתי יחיר ל רגול מרבב
 קדושה לי צור ישועתי
 מוצאי זשבת
 קדיש חסדך קדם
 ראובנים היש משגבי גאולך

פרושת תצוק ערב פורים
 ל-ל זשבת
 למי אויבי רדפוני
 אנה קץ לי מתי נענך
 יום הנצבת
 לפני עבדך תצקה
 אתה קל יחירי
 יביעון שופתי שירה
 ל עושה נקמה
 אור גילה אור גילה
 אדון עולם ישועתי
 אברך את שם ה בחמה
 מוצאים תם תם ונשלים קץ הנעלים
 קדושה לי צור ישועתי
 שירסט רם ונשא לך נפשי אנשי
 כתרי יתנו בלבקלך שכל ל למאס
 אין כלהינו ממרום קולם זשעה ל נעלים
 מנתת זשבת
 ואני תפילתי היש משגבי גאולך
 קדושה רוננו גילו כל הברואים
 מוצאי זשבת לשנפת של זיית נשתי
 קדיש קום ידירי הבה פת וחמוא טבא
 ראובנים פתד פתר כרגייה

RULES AND MEANING

Rabbi Avi Harari

It may seem odd to find an emphasis on law in a kingdom whose leader hosted a banquet that spanned half a year. In fact, the mere mention of rules might seem strange when describing the nature of affairs in such an empire. Surprising, then, is the intentional stress of law and procedure in Shushan, as described at the onset of the Megillah.

The first mention of “rule” comes as a description of Ahashverosh’s banquet, when the *pasuk* states, “And the drinking was according to *royal rule*, there was no compulsion” (1:8). Following Vashti’s refusal to attend, “rule” is again mentioned as part of the king’s reaction: “And the king said to the sages, experts in protocol, for thus was the king’s practice before all the experts in rule and law, and those closest to him were...*according to the rule* what to do with Queen Vashti...” (1:14-15). A final mention of the noun “rule” in the first chapter comes when the king’s sages advised him, invoking the “rules” and stating, “If it please the king, let the royal decree go out from before him *and be written in the rules of Persia and Media*, to the transgressed...” (1:19). The *perek* appropriately ends while invoking rules, as the king’s ministers demanded that every male citizen “*rule in his home* and speak his people’s language” (1:22).

The Megillah’s deliberate emphasis of “rule” in the first chapter is perhaps meant to paint a satirical setting to its story. The irony of a king engaged in banquets that span half a year who seeks a structured law system borders on the hilarious. This setting, however, proved instrumental in the execution of the story’s subsequent occurrences. It is inconceivable under normal circumstances for one minister to single-handedly receive the rights to establish an irreversible mandate to destroy an entire nation. Haman was only able to do so because he operated in a kingdom that strangely merged strict rule¹ with extreme levity.²

¹ “A copy of the writing to be given as rule in every single province, manifested to all the peoples ... The couriers went out rushed by the king’s word, and the rule was given out in Shushan the capital”(2:14-15).

² “And the king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan was confounded”



The ironic setting of the Megillah can teach us an invaluable lesson about our own adherence to *misvot ha-Torah*. The Torah’s elaborate law system presents us with the potential danger of carefully following each of its rules while unknowingly neglecting the underlying lessons.



Illustrated early 18th-century manuscript scroll of the Book of Esther

It is unfortunately easy to appease ourselves with strict adherence to the *halakhot* of Shabbat, while forgetting its ultimate status as a day of rest. Similarly, we might carefully check the ingredients of all of the food we ingest, yet tear down the law’s designated barrier by eating in non-kosher restaurants. We may, as well, drink ourselves to a state of inebriation on a day slated for spiritual growth.

The ironic reality of a kingdom engaged in constant revelry while concurrently obsessed with its rules and structure is not as foreign to us as it may have seemed.

Rabbi Harari is the Rabbi of Congregation Shaare Shalom.

(2:15).

THE HAPPINESS OF THE MONTH OF ADAR

Rabbi Joseph Dweck

There is a famous Talmudic maxim – *'mi'shnichnas adar marbim b'simha'* – when the month of Adar commences we increase our happiness.

Although there are many tunes and melodies to this phrase what does it actually mean? How do we make ourselves happier? Is happiness not a state of mind which either one naturally has or not? I have seen some who venture to say that in order to fulfill this instruction one should progressively drink a bit more wine throughout the month. But I would like to offer a different approach.

Some time ago, I saw a clip showing an American married lady who at a young age lost her hearing, and after extensive medical treatment her hearing was restored at a later age. Being a mother of a young seven-year-old boy she had never heard her son actually speak to her. The clip shows the mother meeting her son for the first time after her successful operation. A simple three words “I love you” from the young boy to his mother invokes a cry of happiness from his mother: “I can hear you, I can hear you”! Her joy and ecstasy at being able to hear is very emotional to see and made me wonder: why are we not jumping for joy every day when we hear our spouse and children communicating with us? Sound waves and the ability to hear is an amazing wonder of creation which we should appreciate every day. And for this reason, every morning we recite the *birchot hashachar* to thank G-D for the basic skills we have in order to instill into ourselves an appreciation and gratitude for the many different faculties we have. When we appreciate this we become happier and more content people.

Adar is a joyful month commemorating the salvation that our nation experienced from the hands of our foes. One who studies the *Megillah* will learn that G-d was constantly there – albeit very concealed. From this position He conducted the entire series of events culminating with our deliverance from Haman. The entire Purim story could be



understood as a natural occurrence of events but in truth it was G-d behind the entire course of events.

By the time we get to Purim we need to be able to be in the correct frame of mind to commemorate the hidden miracles of Purim. Before we get there, we first need to commemorate and be joyful about the “hidden” miracles of nature and not sink in common day nature. Hence in Hebrew, the words *“teva”* (nature) and *“litboa”* (to sink) are from the same root because we sometimes forget and sink in nature.

“The entire Purim story could be understood as a natural occurrence of events but in truth it was G-d behind the entire course of events.”

Our task for the month of Adar is to contemplate and meditate on all the gifts G-d has blessed us with, and then

on Purim we can also truly appreciate the hidden miracles that G-d did for us. By doing this we will surely fulfill the instruction of our Sages – *'mi'shnichnas adar marbim b'simha'*. The more one reflects on his blessings the happier a person becomes.

Rabbi Dweck is the Senior Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Sephardi Community of the United Kingdom.

THE FESTIVAL OF “SAINT” ESTHER

Mr. Moshe Frances

Purim, a holiday of both solemn and festive spirit, represents the Jewish nation prevailing over its enemies, not through military defeat but by the hidden hand of God and the actions of a courageous few. Celebrated for over two millennia, Purim is well known to us and observed as common practice today. The story of the megillah, although revered by us all, held a special meaning to a group of hidden Jews known as *Anusim* who felt a unique connection to Esther, savior of the Jewish people.

In the 14th and 15th centuries of Catholic Spain many Jews faced with persecution and economic restrictions converted. Their population was known as *conversos*. The many *conversos* that outwardly converted yet were secretly “Judaizing” were referred to as *marranos* (pigs) by their Gentile neighbors and as *Anusim* (“the forced ones” in Hebrew) by their Jewish brethren. To root out these false converts from society, a Spanish Inquisition was established in 1478 forcing the *Anusim* to take their Jewish practices underground. While the Spanish Inquisition lasted for several centuries, the *Anusim* over time developed their own unique customs and culture to evade suspicious authorities.

Living under constant fear of their surroundings they often had to publicly transgress Torah law. Thus, they felt they lived in a perpetual state of sin and fasted routinely for atonement. Reading in the megillah about the threat of annihilation to the Jewish nation, the *Anusim* reflected upon their own given situation and found Purim especially relatable.

Historians point out that the *Anusim* associated themselves with Queen Esther, a secret Jewess in the king’s court, as her predicament was similar to their own. Esther’s bravery in hiding her identity, Sabbath observance and keeping her dietary laws motivated them to continue pursuing the double lives they were living. Seeing as Queen Esther proclaimed a fast on behalf of the Jewish people they did the same. During Purim, they practiced a three day fast divided amongst family members.

Furthermore, I would like to conjecture that the Purim



story

appealed to the *Anusim* because they viewed the Spanish Inquisitors as Haman. Haman secretly plotted against the Jews and attempted to hang Mordecai on the “stake.” In the end, Esther (as well as Mordecai) outmaneuvered Haman. This turn of events gave hope to the *Anusim* that they will eventually have their justice and Jews will once again prevail.

Within the community of *Anusim* Esther's courage appealed to Jewish women. They found hope in her actions and decided to canonize Esther into *Saint Ester* or *Santa Esterica*. Any outward display of affection for their new-found Jewish heroine would have detrimental consequences with the ever-suspicious Inquisitors. Due to this they had to make her Catholic. Although Saint Ester was never officially recognized by the church as a Catholic saint, by doing so they would at the very least evade any questioning from neighbors.

Among the Jewish exiles of Spain, a considerable amount ended up in Portugal. However, their haven was short lived and five years later Portugal issued a similar expulsion decree to that of Spain. Luis de Carvajal, a Portuguese pioneer and descendant of *Conversos*, established a settlement known as Nuevo León in Mexico. When his fellow *Anusim* settled there the Festival of Santa Esterica resurfaced once again. Their refuge in Mexico was short lived however, as the Spanish Inquisition followed them there. In one instance, records



This Santo of Saint Esther as created by Charles Carrillo, a well-known contemporary New Mexican santero, author and archaeologist.

show that the testimony of Gabriel de Granada in 1643 reveals that he confessed under torture that his household's female members observed this holiday fervently.

In contemporary times in the American Southwest some Catholics interviewed reported similar household rituals to the Festival of Santa Esterica. They related that this holiday did not only consist of fasting but of feasting as well. The Feast of Santa Esterica was celebrated with a small festive meal shared between mother and daughter. This included kindled candles, stories of Ester's heroism and pork-free familial recipes passed down through generations. They had even displayed Esther's graven image (created by artists) in their homes until the 1960's when the local Archbishop put an end to this practice.

Perhaps a testament to the Midrashic claim that Purim will stand out as a holiday continuously observed even throughout the messianic era, is the zeal in which Jews throughout time have celebrated this holiday even under dire circumstances.

Mr. Frances is a graduate of Yeshiva University and New York University. He is of Judeo-Spanish background and a resident of the Brooklyn Syrian community. He currently serves as an assistant hazzan at Shearith Israel, The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Manhattan.

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HORROR MOVIES - NOT SO SCARY

Mr. Harold Shamah

My son asked me recently to see a horror movie. I do not like the feeling of being scared and nervous. Wanting to spend quality time alone with him I agreed to go anyway. While Jake was jumping out his chair every few minutes, I sat there calmly, surprisingly unaffected by the scary surprise events of the plot. I noticed that I was not drawn in by the suspenseful drama and music preceding the scary scenes which aim to create a nervous energy; a spring loaded coil waiting to pop.

Sitting in my office the next day I noticed I was anxious. I thought about the previous night. Be calm. Everything is being taken care of for me. All I have to do is work methodically, honestly, and intelligently. The nervous energy only complicates matters and makes me less prepared to deal with the scary surprise event.

Clearly the analogy was meant for my life in general; just work hard, honestly and diligently. Follow the correct path and KNOW that everything else is taken care of. No need for worry. No need for discouragement. No need to be depressed. Hashem is hiding in the background guiding my every move. What an empowering perspective! One perhaps not easy to attain, but undeniably worth the work to achieve.

I heard an enlightening quote recently: “there is a lot of ground to cover before I get put in the ground”. *Hazal* teach us that this life is to be enjoyed, but it is primarily a cycle of challenge-work-accomplishment-challenge-work-accomplishment. They explain that the real enjoyment comes from moving up the ladder from one challenge to the next, by experiencing the satisfaction of knowing that whether grand or relatively minor, my participation is essential. Nothing works properly until we all do our part. Am I really so important? The butterfly effect is a proven scientific concept that states that the flap of the wings of a butterfly on one side of the continent can be the impetus for a tsunami on the other.

Purim is a time of the year when we are to be reminded of the hidden hand of G-d working behind the scenes at all



times. We are taught that He is concealed to give us the opportunity to experience the bliss of finding him; a cosmic game of hide and seek. For if Hashem was fully revealed how could we have freedom and by extension any sense of accomplishment? Our ability to choose would be similar to that of the angels who see Hashem's presence incontestably. Do they really have the ability to doubt or sin? In the same way we have a choice to place our hand in fire.

Life can be very frightening. That is what gives it the ability to be exhilarating and at the same time comfortingly peaceful. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl's theory of logotherapy explains that humanity can withstand any “what” if we know the “why.” If we can understand that every challenge is merely a stepping stool to the next level of empowerment then we are strengthened to persevere. That is the reality. We have Hashem's word.

“... the real enjoyment comes from moving up the ladder from one challenge to the next...”

Mr. Shamah is a community businessman and occasional lecturer. He recently authored "Journal To The Soul; A Compilation Of Knowledge In Support Of Jewish Faith" which chronicles his research on Judaism.

PURIM

Rabbi Ilan Acoca

We know the sun rises every morning and sets every evening, and we trust that this will happen again tomorrow simply because it always has. This is how nature operates. This is one way G-d wills His presence to be known. It is how He has established order in the universe, even if we do not always recognize His “hand” behind what we call nature. We just know that in this world the sun rises and sets, oil burns, and children are born. Bearing this in mind, let us look at the story of Purim.

As we all know, during the time of Achaverosh, the king signed an edict that the Jews be killed. Subsequently, Mordechai told Esther that the Jews needed her intervention; Esther had to ask the King to spare the Jewish people. Esther, being initially hesitant, informed Mordechai (Megillat Esther 4:11) that whoever comes to the Inner Court of the king without being called by him is put to death. Only those to whom the king holds out the golden scepter are spared this demise. Mordechai responded by telling Esther that she should not think that merely being in the palace would exempt her from the fate of the rest of her people.

At this point Esther took control, saying Mordechai should gather all the Jews who were present in Shushan that they should fast for Esther, as would she and her attendants. With this preparation she would go to the king despite the risk.

The Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) notes that Esther’s own behavior was puzzling. We know that a person who fasts for three days becomes weak, and, in the case of Esther, would not look as attractive because of the ensuing weakened physical state. As King Achashverosh chose Esther for his

queen because of her physical beauty, why would she want to diminish the most valuable asset she possessed expecting to win him over? Furthermore, why did Esther tell Mordechai that she was going to fast in the first place?

The Talmud (Tractate Megilla 13a) says that Esther had a green hue to her skin and was not very attractive. She understood that if she was chosen queen, G-d Himself was behind it, by giving her a beauty appealing to Achashverosh—much as He is behind the natural order of the universe even if, usually, unacknowledged by us. Consequently, she decided to fast, appealing directly to God, not to her illusory physical beauty. She implored Mordechai to make this abundantly clear to the Jewish community.



The Triumph of Mordechai, by Pieter Lastman 1624

And so, the people understood through Esther’s discernment and courage and Mordechai’s wise direction who really controls our world. The Jews exhibited faith in this reality through fasting and prayer and were saved from annihilation.

“The story of Esther shows how we are to appreciate the role G-d plays in our lives.”

The story of Esther shows how we are to appreciate the role G-d plays in our lives. Nature is a system by which we regulate our lives only because G-d makes it so, and it is as wondrous as miracles are divinely supernatural.

Let us understand in our own lives the mundane, “natural” occurrences for the gifts from G-d which they truly are.

Rabbi Acoca is the Rav Mechanech of Ben Porat Yosef elementary and middle school in Paramus NJ.



COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT

HOMELANDS, PAST AND PRESENT

Mrs. Sally Choueka

In her last moments, capable of little else but sleep, Mary Esses awoke suddenly during the night. Through her fever and without comment she began repeatedly performing one gesture: she held her hands aloft, and with her fingers, rolled batches of imagined yebra', a traditional dish of stuffed grape leaves from her home country of Syria. She shaped them clearly and urgently, the movement ingrained in her hands.

Artist Florence Nasar used these last moments of her grandmother's life as inspiration for her performance *Leaves*, in which women roll yebra' while others are symbolically carried across the stage, leaving one homeland for another. Nasar describes it as "an echo" of a place left behind. The work presents narratives of migration, and the natural questions that accompany any story of displacement: Where is home? What do we take with us when we leave?

Nasar is one of fifteen artists participating in an upcoming art exhibition on this topic called *Homelands*. A show supported in part by the SCA, *Homelands* is about the Jews of Muslim lands. The exhibition aids in bringing the dissolution of prominent, longstanding Jewish communities to the forefront of public awareness. Through various artistic mediums, the stories of these Jewish people are given voice from a new angle.

The events of the last one hundred years uprooted Jewish communities throughout the Muslim world. *Homelands* utilizes work that relates to this issue on multiple levels in order to give perspective on these histories. How did these events affect people as



individuals and communities as a whole? What are some of the consequences of the disbanding of these ancient communities, both for Jews and the wider world? How are we still dealing with the ramifications of this today?



Hope and Celebration, by Camille Fox

The show includes artists from the communities of Syria, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, and Yemen in order to present a full picture of these events. All of the artists are either refugees or descendants of Jews from the Muslim world. Questions of identity and displacement, of loss and renewed hope emerge as challenging contemporary issues. The exhibit includes works of photography, performance, video, sculpture, painting and drawing. Artists Lenore Cohen and Raquel Mizrahi feature their work depicting the stories of refugees,

describing things that they have lost and left. Irene Mamiye contributed her video installation, *Veils*, which hides and reveals shadowy photographs from her family's past life in Egypt, leaving viewers to decipher or grasp a meaning from these "lost" images. Other artists celebrate the lost worlds from which they come, such as Camille Fox's colorful rendition of a wedding party in Egypt.

Produced by Lenore Cohen, the exhibition premieres this October as part of a larger annual survey of contemporary Jewish art: The 2017 Jerusalem Biennale. Selected from over 100 applicants worldwide, *Homelands* will

His work has been featured in major museums around the world. When asked why he chose to participate in *Homelands*, he commented, "We [Jews of Muslim lands] have so much to give to the Jewish community. We should be open, and aware of traditions that come from everywhere." When asked why he continues to engage in art that promotes Mizrahi and Sephardic culture, he replied, "because it is the core of who I am; we should not want to be a polite secret any longer."



Sitoh's Collander, by Fortune Chalme

Homelands is sponsored in part by The Sephardic Community Alliance (SCA), American Sephardi Federation (ASF), Jews

"We [Jews of Muslim lands] have so much to give to the Jewish community. We should be open, and aware of traditions that come from everywhere."

be presented in Jerusalem and placed on this prominent world stage alongside other shows that center on contemporary issues in Judaism through art. From there, *Homelands* has been offered venues in NY and LA, enabling it to continue to be used as an opportunity for education and advocacy on this important issue.

Photographer Zion Ozeri, a longtime advocate for Jewish cultural awareness and another participating artist, compared the greater Jewish world to a mosaic. Himself a descendant of Yemenite Jews, he is known internationally for his groundbreaking photography and a school curriculum centered on Jewish cultural literacy, The Jewish Lens. Ozeri's efforts have helped fuel the emerging dialogues on the Jewish experience in Muslim lands.

Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA), and The Jerusalem Biennale. Additional support from the community is being sought to help Homelands fulfill its mission to place these issues in public forums around the world. We invite all to join us at the opening in Jerusalem this Sukkot. To sponsor the exhibit please visit www.scaupdates.org/donate and select "Homelands Art Show" from the list of options. We thank the community for its support of our artists and their important work in celebrating and preserving our heritage.



An opening event from the 2015 Jerusalem Biennale at the Tower of David Museum

Mrs. Choueka is a freelance writer and graduate student at Pennsylvania State University.



SCA LEARNING

SCA WOMEN'S PROGRAM

Mrs. Mollie Haber

The SCA Women's Learning Program Spring Session is off to a great start. Following the success of last semester, new topics, exciting teachers, and additional classes have been added to the Spring schedule.

As the director of the program, I have heard lots of wonderful feedback. So many women have participated and enjoyed being part of this great opportunity. Here are some testimonials from our attendees:

The SCA's Women's learning program is an incredible gift. Giving women of all ages the opportunity to stop in the midst of our busy days to reconnect to our identity, be intellectually stimulated, and grow in our Torah education. The vast array of topics, teachers, and students has created an engaging environment that is invaluable to our community.

– *Aimee Bailey*

After 25 years I became a student again! My classes became an integral part of my week. Its a wonderful feeling to be learning again. Thank you SCA for a fabulous program!

– *Elaine Dweck*

The SCA Women's classes have filled a void that was sorely lacking in our community. High level, intellectual learning with careful thought out topics, along with delicious lunches. I can't say I am loving it enough.

– *Stefanie Zakay*

The SCA classes give women an opportunity to delve deeply into our sacred texts and discover new ways of approaching our ancient tradition. The various perspectives of both the teachers and students create a learning community that is at once challenging and warm.

– *Lauren Grunsfeld*

The SCA Women's Learning Program has helped fill a big void in the community. The wide array of topics and dynamic teachers provides so many options to chose from. It is the perfect antidote for those of us searching to help further our Judaic studies education.

– *Renee Husney*

It is so nice to see women of all ages coming to learn. Thank you for giving them the opportunity to expand their education in Torah and Judaism.

– *Frieda Cattan*

The SCA classes have provided me not just access to individually excellent teachers that are relatable as community members, but also helped me incorporate learning as part of my structured week/weekly routine. That is what I appreciate most.

– *Esther Varon*

In day to day life, it is so easy to get caught up in trivial, mundane matters. These classes have been a refreshing refuge; a chance for me to renew my perspective and readjust my focus.

– *Allie Halabi*

We encourage all community women to join us. With the devotion of the SCA lay leadership and our amazing teachers and students, the SCA continues to inspire Torah learning and growth. For more information please visit SCAupdates.org or follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @SCA_updates for the latest schedules and updates.

Mrs. Haber is the Director of the SCA Women's Program.





COMMUNITY EVENT

AN EVENING WITH DENNIS ROSS

Ms. Estelle Saad

On Saturday night, January 14th, the Sabra Institute Fellows were honored to hold a closed door conversation with Ambassador Dennis Ross before his address to the community at Beth Torah. We used this opportunity to question a tried and true expert on the intricacies of the Middle East, especially as it related to Israel. Topics discussed included the usefulness of attempting to overturn the UN's recent resolution condemning Israeli settlements, relocating the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and how/ if President Trump will benefit Israel. With his extensive knowledge and experience, Ambassador Ross explained the importance of maintaining a strong relationship between Israel and America and how those ties are dependent on the active engagement of Jewish youth in America.

In the larger address to Beth Torah, Ambassador Ross explained how Israel's relationships with majority Sunni-Muslim populations are vital in countering radical Shiite regimes. Ambassador Ross also touched on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, explaining that he does not see any capacity on either side to negotiate peace today. Ambassador Ross believes that a two-state solution is the only route to peace and is feasible if the Palestinians develop the proper foundation and infrastructure (which has not been a priority of the current Palestinian leadership) and of course, recognize Israel's right to exist. Ambassador Ross explained how "distrust and disbelief" on both sides affects the peace process and that private efforts to foster new trust



Sabra Institute Fellows

levels are vital if peace is ever to be achieved. Ambassador Ross believes that one binational state will completely erode Israel's Jewish character since the Arab population could conceivably overtake the current Israeli majority in the coming years.

We thank Ambassador Ross for taking the time to speak with us and the community as a whole,

as well as all he has done for America and Israel during his time working with the government.

Ms. Saad is a senior in the Yeshivah of Flatbush. She plans on going to business school in New York next year.





SEPHARDIC CUSTOMS

MI KHAMOKHA

Mr. Joseph Mosseri

If you ask most people what they associate with the holiday of Purim, they will tell you *Megillat Esther*, *Mishloah Manot* and *Matanot LaEbyonim*; some may even say *Ta'anit Esther*. If you answered them “what about *Mi Khamokha*”? they will likely have an utterly confused look on their face. On the Shabbat prior to Purim known as *Shabbat Zakhor*, we recite the *Mi Khamokha* poem. This article will provide a brief history of the poem and its recitation by Sepharadim.

Hakham Yehudah Halevi (1075 Toledo, Spain – 1141 Jerusalem), one of the greatest Hebrew poets to have ever lived, retells the entire story of Purim in a masterful piece of poetry entitled *Mi Khamokha*. For centuries this piece of most beloved poetry was included in our *Shabbat Zakhor* liturgy and it was embraced by all Sephardic communities, from the Spanish and Portuguese communities in London, Amsterdam, and Bordeaux, to the Italian communities, and the North African and Middle Eastern communities. This was not the only poem he wrote with the name *Mi Khamokha*, nor was he the only one to compose poems with such a name, but this is the only one to have withstood the test of time and is incorporated in all Sephardic prayer books and is recited yearly on *Shabbat Zakhor*.

The poem opens in Hebrew as such:

“*Mi Khamokha, VeEn Kamokha, Mi Domeh Lakh, VeEn Domeh Lakh*”

In English this translates to:

“Who is like You, but nobody is like You, who is similar to You, but nobody is similar to You”

This *Mi Khamokha* is 81 stanzas long, (81 happens to be the numerical value, *gematria*, of Yehudah HaLevi), divided among 4 sections. The first section has each stanza in alphabetical order, the second section has an acrostic of



his and his father's name, the third section is once again alphabetical, and the fourth section acrostically spells out his name.

The entire poem is a marvelous literary tour-de-force, overflowing with clever biblical references while maintaining proper meter and rhythm.

Each stanza is organized of 4 lines, where the last word of the 4th line is the same throughout the entire poem. The most amazing aspect is that he was able to accomplish this by using exact quotes from the entire TaNaKh and each one concludes with the exact same word “LO” (to him).

A question that has always been asked is, at what point in the prayer is this recited and is that the place Hakham Yehudah HaLevi intended for it to be recited.

There are communities that recite it before *Barukh SheAmar* (like the *Halabi* custom of reciting *piyutim* at that point on the High Holidays). There are those that say it after *Qaddish Titqabal* of *Shahrit* (like the custom of many communities on the High Holidays). Others recite it after the haftarah and *mi sheberakh*,

before *Ashré*, and that is the custom of our Syrian, Egyptian, and Lebanese communities as we witness in Brooklyn today.

Older sources do not mention any of these three customs; rather, they mention three very different and unlikely places for us to recite *Mi Khamokha* which would probably astound most.

Keep in mind that the opening is *Mi Khamokha* and as such it was meant to be recited at a point in prayer where the words *Mi Khamokha* are normally said. The first place this is possible, is in *Az Yashir*, where the *pasouq* (Shemot 15:11) starts with the words “*Mi Khamokha*.” The poem can therefore be recited immediately prior to that verse. The second place it can be recited is in the *Nishmat* section, right after the hazzan says the words (of Tehillim 35:10) *Kal ‘Assmotai Tomarna, Amonai Mi Khamokha*. Finally, the third place – and the most surprising - that it can be recited, is about five lines prior to starting the *‘Amidah*, immediately after *Besimhah Rabbah VeAmeroo Khoollam*, where we once again have the words ‘*Mi Khamokha*’ referenced in the prayer.

Various communities have adopted one of these three customs. Based upon the text of the poem as well as the words of our prayer, the two most likely original spots for it were either in *Az Yashir* or before the *‘Amidah*. The rationale for the first placement is that the last few stanzas of the poem refer to the miracles when *Bené Yisrael* crossed *Yam Soof* and *Par’o* and his men drowned, and the song they sang. Naturally, *Az Yashir* fits the bill, due to the fact that the *shirah* focuses on the miracle of God splitting the sea. However, the last few lines of prayer before the *‘Amidah* reference the same event. That being said, why doesn’t our community recite it at one of these points? It’s because we follow the opinion of RaMBaM (Responso 207) as well as *Shulhan ‘Arukh* (*Orah Haim* 68:1) to not interrupt any of the *berakhot* of *Shema*’ with any song. We also follow the opinion of Hakham Shaul Kohen of Djerba (*Nokhah HaShulhan* 68) who says not to interrupt the *Zemirot* with song either. Finally, we also adhere to the ruling

of the HID”A (*Tob ‘Ayin* 18:35) of not adding any songs to the *Nishmat* section. As such, the custom of our communities is to say the poem right before *Ashré* of *Musaf*.

One final point is that all Sepharadim recite the entire poem, which takes about 15 minutes, as part of the prayer service on *Shabbat Zakhor* morning. The only community which does not recite the poem in its entirety as part of the *Shabbat Zakhor* prayer service is the *Halabi* community. The *Halabi* community though world renowned for its love of song was always concerned with “*to-rahk seeboor*,” burdening the congregants. As such, the *Halabi minhag* is to only recite

the first three and last three verses in *knis*, in order that this majestic poem not be forgotten and as a reminder to recite it later. In recent years unfortunately, this has led to the misconception that *Halabiyeh* never recite the full poem, which is utterly false. *Mi Khamokha* was so beloved it was one of the few things printed in *Halab* in *SHARH* Judeo-Arabic. On the afternoon of *Shabbat Zakhor* people would gather in homes and synagogues and listen to boys reciting it. As a side note Judeo-Arabic versions of *Mi Khamokha* were published by and for every Middle Eastern and North African Jewish community, further attesting to the great significance of this piece of holiday liturgy.

In recent decades as there are less people proficient in Arabic, and many more who understand Hebrew, commentaries on this prose have been composed by a number of great Hakhamim. The three most important that I am familiar with are by Hakham David Chelouche in 1980, Hakham Meir Mazouz in 2001, and Hakham Obadiah Yosef in 2003.

So please take the time to sing this centuries old poem in *knis* and at home. Let’s keep the torch of our traditions burning bright and strong for many more generations to come.



Sculpture of Hakham Yehudah Halevi, Malaga Spain

Mr. Mosseri is a noted expert on Sephardic customs.



SEPHARDIC HISTORY

NEVER FORGET OUR NOBLE HERITAGE

NUNCA OLVIDES MUESTRA HISTORIA DESTINGUIDA

נונכה אולבידיס מואיסטרה איסטוריה דיסטינגיידה

Mr. Sheldon N. Goldman

CHAPTER 8: Conclusion

The position of Aleppo deteriorated even further after World War I. The postwar settlement established new political boundaries between Syria, under a French mandate, and Turkey and Iraq, borders which cut Aleppo off from the greater parts of its agricultural and economic hinterland. Moreover, the numerous Armenian refugees who flocked into the country (encouraged by the French, who sought to strengthen the Christian element in Syria), constituted a source of serious economic competition for the Jews. This challenge notwithstanding, the community continued to function smoothly, and its leadership participated in global Jewish concerns. A 1927 report notes that the committee of the local Jewish community undertook to represent the Jewish National Fund and the World Confederation of Sephardic Jews; that the same committee was responsible for the sale of 1,500 sheqels (entitling the bearers to vote in the election of the Zionist



gained considerable momentum after Syria achieved independence in 1936, brought the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine to the attention of the public in Syria. Naturally, Aleppo could not be detached from these developments. However, Aleppo's Jews were not directly affected until the late forties. Not even during the short period of Vichy rule in Syria (1940-1941) were they seriously victimized by the anti-Jewish legislation

“The Jewish heritage of Aleppo stands out among that of other Jewish communities in the world by virtue of its antiquity and continuity...”

Organization Congress); and that one person had been elected to represent Aleppo's Zionists at the Congress. Following Hitler's rise to power, Aleppo's Jewish merchants declared a boycott on trade with Germany, arranged protest demonstrations, and sent donations to aid the refugees that had fled Nazi persecution.

The Syrian Arab nationalist movement, which

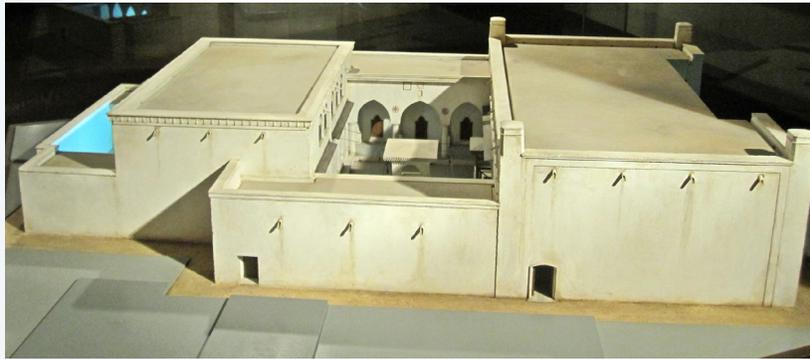
enacted by the colonial regime, and enforced elsewhere in regions under its jurisdiction.

Soon after the United Nations resolution of 1947 in favor of the partition of Palestine, anti-Jewish riots broke out in Aleppo. Synagogues were set afire, Jewish shops and houses were pillaged, and thousands of Aleppo's Jews

were forced to flee the country. The refugees reached Lebanon and Turkey, and from these lands, many proceeded on to Palestine or the United States. Less than 4,000 Jews remained in Aleppo (from a Jewish population numbering about 18,000 in the early 1930s), under the persistent repression of the authorities. Despite the fact that it was forbidden to leave Syria, many members of the community sustained the risk in order to escape persecution. A significant number of the young men did manage to flee the country, leaving behind many single young women with slim prospects of marriage.

The last Jews left Aleppo in the early 1990s. The Jewish heritage of Aleppo stands out among that of other Jewish communities in the world by virtue of its

antiquity and continuity, as well as its perseverance in the face of the adversities that have afflicted it over the centuries. The Jewish families that emigrated from Aleppo, both those dispersed throughout the world and those who chose to make Israel their home, are living evidence of the unique character and stature of this distinguished community.



Model of the Great Synagogue of Aleppo - side view, exhibit at the Diaspora Museum, Tel Aviv

Mr. Goldman is a retired Chemical Engineer who is a member of Congregations Beth Torah and Kol Israel. From 1978 through 2002 he was the Editor of the Beth Torah Bulletin. He was Secretary of Beth Torah from 1980 through 2005 and is still the Editor of the Beth Torah Calendar.



Model of the Great Synagogue of Aleppo, exhibit at the Diaspora Museum, Tel Aviv



SEPHARDIC RABBIS

RABBI YOM TOB SAHALON AND THE FIRST BOOK EVER PRINTED IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Rabbi Yosef Bitton

Rabbi Yom Tob ben Moshe Sahalon (1559-1619), also known by his acronym “מהריט”ץ, was a student of Rabbi Moshe of Tirani (the Mabbit) and Rabbi Moshe Alshekh haQadosh. It is also possible that he had occasionally studied under Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the *Shulhan ‘Arukh*.

Rabbi Sahalon was a child prodigy. Not only for his precocious intelligence but mainly for his passionate dedication to the study of the Torah, when he was a teenager. Referring to his learning with Rabbi Mabbit and Rabbi Alshekh, he writes: “*I devoted myself to studying at night, day and evening, without pause ... clinging to the dust of the feet of the two great luminaries [his two teachers] and drinking with thirst their words and teachings ... [During all this time] I did not rest or pause, and I only dedicated myself to learning the Divine judgments [the laws of the Torah] ... I suffered the mockery of my friends when they saw that I was walking on these good paths, they despised me because I did not do what the youth of my age used to do ... but I did not distract myself... since my greatest delight was always to learn to learn Divine Laws ...*”

The effort paid off. When he was 20 years old, the young Rab Sahalon began to write his *Pesaqim*, that is, his Rabbinic Responsa, something reserved for mature and very experienced Rabbis.

We have evidence that at the age of 25 some of the most important rabbis of that time, such as Rabbi Shemuel Yafe of Constantinople (1525-1595) consulted with the young Rabbi Sahalon, to know his opinion in all kinds of rabbinical jurisprudence cases.

Some of those responses were published in what is the most famous book of Rabbi Sahalon *She-elot Utshubot Maharitats*. This book is a collection of Rabbinical questions and answers, on topics of Jewish ritual and legal issues.



לקח טוב *Leqah Tob*

One of Rabbi Sahalon’s lesser-known books, but perhaps the most fascinating one, is a commentary on Megillat Esther, the Book of Esther. The name of the book is *Leqah Tob*. I have three reasons to affirm that this is an exceptional book.

1. Rabbi Sahalon published this book in the year 1577. Considering that he was born in 1559, we see that when he published this book he was 18! Which means that he wrote this book in his early teens.
2. What makes this book truly unique is that it was the first book ever published in the land of Israel! Let me explain: until the year 1577, there were no printing presses in Israel. Jewish books were printed mainly in Italy (Rome, Ferrara, Venice) or Turkey. The first printing press in the history of Israel was established in the city of Sefat by Rabbi Eliezer ben Yitshaq Ashkenazi, who had already had his own printing press in Lublin (Poland) and Constantinople (Turkey). The printing press in Israel did not last

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WOMEN'S LEARNING SCHEDULE

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	SHABBAT
11:00am - 12:30pm MRS. VIVIEN HIDARY <i>Location: Mikdash Eliyahu</i> <i>400 Avenue U</i> <i>Analysis of Parashat Hashabua</i>	11:00am - 12:00pm MRS. ANNIE SAVDIE <i>Location: Beth Torah</i> <i>1061 Ocean Parkway</i> <i>Niddah - From Torah to Today</i>	10:30am - 11:45am RABBI NAFTALI BESSER <i>Location: Beth Torah</i> <i>1061 Ocean Parkway</i> <i>Themes and Ideas of the Parasha</i>	Minha Time MRS. VIVIEN HIDARY <i>Location: Beth Torah</i> <i>1061 Ocean Parkway</i> <i>Parashat Hashabua</i>
	11:15am - 12:15pm MRS. FRIEDA CATTAN <i>(February only)</i> <i>Location: Mikdash Eliyahu</i> <i>400 Avenue U</i> <i>Jewish History Second Temple Period</i>		Minha Time MRS. ILANA ALOUF <i>Location: Hochma U'Mussar</i> <i>718 Avenue S</i> <i>Parashat Hashabua</i>
12:45pm - 1:45pm MRS. MARGARET BENHAMU <i>Location: Mikdash Eliyahu</i> <i>400 Avenue U</i> <i>Texts of the Hagim: Megillat Esther/ Haggadah/ Megillat Ruth</i>	12:15pm - 1:15pm RABBI RICKY HIDARY/ MRS. ESTHER HIDARY <i>(alternate weeks)</i> <i>Location: Beth Torah</i> <i>1061 Ocean Parkway</i> <i>Reading the Torah Philosophically</i>	12:00pm - 1:00pm MRS. EMILY LABATON <i>Location: Beth Torah</i> <i>1061 Ocean Parkway</i> <i>Jewish History - Confrontation with the Greeks</i>	
	1:30pm - 2:30pm MRS. ILANA ALOUF <i>Location: Beth Torah</i> <i>1061 Ocean Parkway</i> <i>Shir Hashirim-The Relationship Bet. God & Israel Throughout History</i>	1:00pm - 2:00pm RABBI RAYMOND HARARI <i>Location: Mikdash Eliyahu</i> <i>400 Avenue U</i> <i>Insights into the Weekly Parasha</i>	
8:00pm - 9:00pm RABBI AVI HARARI <i>Location: Shaare Shalom</i> <i>2021 Avenue S</i> <i>Sefer Shemuel</i> <i>Young Adult Women</i>	7:00pm - 8:00pm RABBI MOSES HABER <i>Location: Bnei Yitzhak</i> <i>730 Avenue S</i> <i>Jewish Thought and Jewish Values</i> <i>Young Adult Women</i>		
	8:15pm - 9:15pm MRS. AURA SUTTON <i>Location: Hochma U'Mussar</i> <i>718 Avenue S</i> <i>Tefilot of Shabbat and Holidays</i>		

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730 Avenue S
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For more information
 please contact
mollie.haber@gmail.com

Sephardic Community Alliance
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