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The Be'chol Lashon newsletter contains items of interest from worldwide Jewish communities. It serves to further educate isolated Jewish individuals and communities about the policies and practices of the mainstream Jewish community and to educate Jews in the mainstream about others with whom they may not be familiar.

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## ABAYUDAYA COMMUNITY UPDATES

### Water, The Gift of Life



We are delighted to update you on the rapid progress of the Abayudaya Community Health and Development Plan. Everyday we hear exciting news about the work taking place in Uganda. We will continue to keep you updated. To read the previous updates, please [click here](#).

***Water is life and sanitation is health, as the saying goes. Water, a basic human right, is at the heart of a daily crisis faced by millions of the world's most vulnerable people. This crisis threatens life and destroys livelihood on a devastating scale. Water gives life to ever thing. People need water as they need oxygen. Without both, life would be non-existent. When people are denied access to clean water, it means that their freedoms are being constrained by vulne ability and ill-health. Delivering clean water, removing wastes from water, and improving sanitation, are the three of the most basic foundations for human progress facing the Abayudaya Jewish Community of Uganda.***

**Excerpted from a letter from Jacob Mwosuko, Chairman, Abayudaya Health Committee, Abayudaya Executive Council**

The Abayudaya Jewish community of Uganda is achieving their goal of connecting with Jews around the world to ensure their survival and security. The leadership is focused on building the infrastructure to improve healthcare and develop businesses to provide community revenue. These efforts will benefit all residents of their sub-county, including Jews, Christians, and Muslims, therefore promoting peace and security in the region.

This inspirational project is becoming a reality through your generosity. To donate now, [click here](#).

## EVENTS & COMMUNITY UPDATES

### Community Honors and Remembers Dele Jane Osawe



Chief Dr. Dele Jane Osawe died in Lagos, Nigeria on July 10, 2007. She was a vibrant member of Be'chol Lashon and a tireless advocate for the Jewish people. Helping to build Jewish communities in Africa was her greatest passion.

When Dele left her home in Chicago for Nigeria this month, Rabbi Capers Funnye went to pray with her. Dele told him that if anything should happen we should not forget our mission of building a Jewish school and synagogue in her home village. Rabbi Capers Funnye captures best what Dele meant to so many people, "My mother gave me birth, and Dele gave me a rebirth in the land of Africa. Dele had the strength and power to draw folks together in love and understanding."

Dele Osawe was a deeply spiritual Jew. She was an active member of Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago. Dele was a dynamic member of Be'chol Lashon, adding so much each year to the International Think Tanks, where a group of leaders from Jewish communities around the world dedicate themselves to growing and strengthening the Jewish people through racial, ethnic and cultural inclusiveness. It was there that she became a founding member of the Pan African Jewish Alliance (PAJA) whose mission is to grow the Jewish communities of Africa. Dr. Osawe had recently conducted extensive research among the Nigerian African Jewish communities.

Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, from Uganda, spoke of Dele's life: "It is so sad to hear about the passing away of Jane Osawe. We have lost a key person in our African Judaism program. Jane has been hard working and always determined to move a step forward. May her spirit diffuse into the rest of us so that we may be able to carry forward from where she left off and may the Holy One of Israel rest her soul in eternal peace."

Dele had been diagnosed with liver cancer caused by Aflatoxin, a grain mold prevalent in Africa and Asia. She had traveled to Nigeria to seek advice from a doctor from India, who specializes in her type of cancer. But

unfortunately the odds were against her. Rabbi Capers and Mary Funnye, and Dele's husband, Bruce Carey, will attend her funeral to be scheduled sometime in August in Nigeria.

Dr. Dele Jane Osawe was the program director for the mental health specialized counseling and residential facility at Human Resources Developmental Institute (HRDI) in Chicago and adjunct faculty member at Argosy University in Chicago. She earned a masters degree in education from Northeastern Illinois University, and a Ph. D. in clinical psychology from Argosy University, Illinois School of Professional Psychology.

Dr. Osawe was born in Nigeria. In 1983, she was elected into the Bendel State House of Assembly, making her the first woman to be elected to political office from her constituency after being a representative of her clan, Ejeme, since 1979. In 1987, she was honored with the title of Odozi-Ani and was made a chief by his Royal Highness, Obi Nzemeke, Agbogidi 1 of Ejeme-Unor. Odozi-Ani literally means "one who repairs the land".

Dr. Osawe volunteered her time and expertise with a number of foundations and community organizations in the United States and Africa. She helped to organize the building of the first high school in her clan, and the Odozi-Ani Self Help Youth Club, which instills productivity and unity into the youth of the clan. The first project accomplished through this effort was the building of the only Postal Agency in the village through membership donations of labor and materials. Additionally, Dr. Osawe personally funded ten educational scholarships annually in Nigeria, eight for high school and two for university students. She also founded the Ashinze-Osawe Scholarship Foundation for Cameroonian students in a computer science program in any university in Cameroon. She was the African Civil Society Organization's (ACSO) representative for USA and Canada. The ACSO, headquartered in Cameroon, is a continental grassroots organization for the unification of Africa.

Dr. Jane Dele Osawe resided in Chicago with her husband, Bruce Carey, and is survived by five adult children and two adorable grandchildren, living in both the United States and Nigeria.

Donations to build community including synagogues and schools in Nigeria can be made in Memory of Dele Jane Osawe.

## Mazel Tov to Bar Mitzvah, Igaal Sizomu

Gary and Diane Tobin, June 22, 2007



We had the privilege of attending Igaal Sizomu's Bar Mitzvah on June 9th, 2007 at Shomrei Torah in Los Angeles, where his father Rabbi Sizomu serves as a rabbinic intern while completing his studies at the University of Judaism. Igaal stood poised on the Bimah in his new khaki suit and beautiful Talit with matching Abayudaya Kippah and read from the Torah.

In Igaal's Torah portion, Shelah-Lekha, Moses sends scouts to look at the Promised Land on behalf of the Israelites. While the land was acknowledged to be flowing with milk and honey, 10 of the 12 scouts are pessimistic about the feasibility of conquering it. The people react to the scouts' reports by rebelling openly against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. By implication, they are also questioning the value of their allegiance to God. The result of their report was to harm the Israelites' determination and self-confidence - "we looked like grasshoppers to ourselves, and so we must have looked to them" (Numbers 13:33). This negative report caused a lack of faith in the people's own ability to confront the challenge of inheriting the Land, delaying entry into the Land of Israel by an entire generation.

Igaal taught us good leaders should help people to rise to a challenge, not cause people to doubt themselves. Igaal pledged to follow in his father's footsteps and become a leader of his people. His father was visibly proud and excited, and commended Igaal for his lofty goals. Rabbi Gershom and Tziporah Sizomu praised their son's compassion for others and natural ability to make friends. They assured him that these qualities would contribute to making him a good leader.

We created a college fund for Igaal, where he is saving all money he receives for his Bar Mitzvah for college. If you would like to contribute to Igaal's college fund in honor of his Bar Mitzvah, click the button below.

## Wedding Announcement!



**Mazel Tov to Alysa Stanton and Michael Hall on their upcoming wedding, August 12th, 2007, in Denver Colorado.**

We wish Alysa and Michael a life full of happiness where their dreams come true.

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## Be'chol Lashon Co-Sponsors *The Longing* at the SFJFF



Be'chol Lashon is pleased to co-sponsor a film at the 2007 [San Francisco Jewish Film Festival](#).

**The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America**  
**Gabriela Bohm, Israel, USA, 2006, 75 min.**

The poignant and inspiring story of six South Americans who long to affirm their Jewish faith against all odds. They believe they are among millions descended from crypto-Jews, immigrants to the Americas who secretly practiced Judaism despite centuries of draconian prohibition during the Spanish Inquisition. Now their descendants wish to reclaim a

heritage and a faith long buried, but face resistance from both within and outside the Jewish community.

### Show Times for **The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America**

Aquarius Theatre, Palo Alto  
Mon., July 30th at 4:30 PM

Roda Theatre at the Berkeley Rep  
Sat., August 4th at 4:45 PM

Be'chol Lashon panel discussion following the film will feature the filmmaker, Gabriela Bohm

Smith Rafael Film Center

Sun., August 5th at 2:15 PM

Tickets and online schedule available at [www.sjff.org](http://www.sjff.org)

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## Be'chol Lashon Advisory Member to Speak at the Commonwealth Club

**August 28th at 5:30pm**  
**Commonwealth Club of California**  
**595 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94105**  
**Next to Montgomery BART**



Commonwealth Club of California, Middle East Forum and Water Resources Center Archives, UC Berkeley present Dr. Booker Holton, Ecologist:

"Water and Israel: A Political and Environmental Issue"

Tuesday, August 28th at the Commonwealth Club, San Francisco  
5:30pm, Reception; 6:00pm, Program  
For more information call 415-597-6700

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## CURRENT NEWS

### Spain Before Poland

By Fania Oz-Salzberger, April 17, 2007, [Haaretz.com](http://Haaretz.com)



"Best to stay at home, close the cash register of the trips to Poland, and start learning history from the beginning," writes Avirama Golan ("Enough of the shock treatment," Haaretz, April 10, 2007). I second almost every word. Auschwitz was not meant for 17-year-old Israelis, certainly not in rowdy groups of school pupils.

Some of them are serious boys and girls with an open mind, some of their escorts are good and devoted educators, and some schools have done excellent preparation work. But not all. Concentration camps are not appropriate for a first trip overseas, at an age when hormones are active, and as part of a class.

The existing arrangement - and this is written with respect and admiration for the initiators and organizers - is

good for neither teenagers nor for Auschwitz. Auschwitz must be visited at the age of 30. Quietly. After a great deal of reading. Without mobile phones beeping and the sugar rush derived from the mini-bar at the hotel in Warsaw.

But to "learn history from the beginning" - Jewish and world history that demonstrates, as Golan suggests, how Jewish history is interwoven with the history of mankind and culture - one must not necessarily "stay at home." Take the money, enlist more supportive foundations, and take select groups of Israeli pupils to Andalusia, in the south of Spain. Because there, in many ways, begins the story that ends in Auschwitz: the story of Jewish Europe, which is both an Ashkenazi and Sephardi tale.

At "Granada of the Jews" they will visit Alhambra and hear about Shmuel Hanagid. In Cordoba they will visit the Great Mosque, the beautiful synagogue and see the statue of Maimonides. In Toledo they will get to know the Jewish Museum of Spain and read a text of Yehudah Halevy, engraved, for a change, on stone. One may even dare to sneak a poem of Lorca's into the program.

Israeli pupils, both Jewish and Arab, would take this trip together. Only those who studied and prepared for it seriously and with interest would be chosen to go. Their parents will pay only a symbolic fee, a sign of commitment to the values it represents. All the rest would be financed by the Education Ministry, the Spanish government - some of whose officials have displayed considerable interest in this idea - and independent foundations.

The birthright Israel project, which brings young Jewish Americans to Israel free of charge, may be interested in adding its participants to the Israeli groups discovering their joint past in one of the large joint cradles of the three civilizations, in an era in which they exchanged ideas, not only loathing.

Somewhere in Andalusia there was a small paper mill at the end of the Middle Ages. It was at that time that the ancient Chinese technology arrived, after a long journey across Asia and North Africa, and entered Europe via Spain. Without it Gutenberg would not have been able to print. And lo, that mill was operated by two partners, a Jew and a Muslim. Their clients from the north were Christians. This story, symbolic rather than historic, should be told to 17-year-old Jewish and Arab Israelis. You have to be a great pessimist not to tell it. It is a story of life and rejuvenation. It would not overshadow the story of the persecuted and the murdered, but empower it greatly.

Woe to a Jewish-Israeli identity that relies only on the ashes of the crematoria. Our European past also includes a thousand years of life, art and the spreading of knowledge. Would Israeli youngsters continue to line up to obtain European passports if they were exposed to the major Jewish role in the construction of modern Europe? I doubt it.

But instead of wrapping themselves up in the Israeli flag like a deceased person, they could walk the streets of Venice and Krakow and Thessaloniki and search for signs of life, not only traces of death. Our fathers had a place here, they will say. Our fathers helped establish modern literature, art and science. They and our mothers knew how to read better than most Europeans during most of Europe's history. In their wanderings they transported with them innovations and ideas, not merely holy scriptures and memories of deportation.

And Europe did not always reject and persecute them. Maimonides was taught in Paris, Moses Mendelssohn in Berlin, the Talmud in Amsterdam. As for the justification for establishing modern Israel - that they will have to deduce for themselves. They are intelligent enough.

## Sao Paulo Jews Elect New President

By JTA Staff, June 15, 2007, JTA.org



Boris Ber was elected president of the São Paulo Jewish Community, taking the lead of half of Brazil's Jewry.

The 53-year-old business administrator and longtime activist was elected to a 30-month term at the helm of São Paulo's wealthy and influential 60,000-strong Jewish community.

"Among our major challenges are also strengthening our affiliated institutions through an open dialogue that helps detecting their problems and promoting and outreach work to bring inside those Jews who are apart of the yishuv," Ber said.

## Will Sarkozy's Jewish Roots Impact France's Policies?

By Raanan Eliaz, May 11, 2007, European Jewish Press



In an interview French President-elect Nicolas Sarkozy gave in 2004, he expressed an extraordinary understanding of the plight of the Jewish people for a home: "Should I remind you the visceral attachment of every Jew to Israel, as a second mother homeland? There is nothing outrageous about it. Every Jew carries within him a fear passed down through generations, and he knows that if one day he will not feel safe in his country, there will always be a place that would welcome him. And this is Israel."

Sarkozy's sympathy and understanding is most probably a product of his upbringing. It is well known that Sarkozy's mother was born to the Mallah family, one of the oldest Jewish families of Salonika, Greece. Yet it remains to be seen whether his personal history will affect his foreign policy and France's role in

the Middle East conflict.

In the 15th century, the Mallah family (Hebrew for messenger or angel) escaped the Spanish Inquisition to Provence, France, and moved about 100 years later to Salonika. In Greece, several family members became prominent Zionist leaders, active in the local and national political, economic, social and cultural life.

In 1917, a great fire destroyed parts of Salonika and damaged the Mallah family estate. Many Jewish-owned properties, including the Mallah's, were expropriated by the Greek government. The Jewish population emigrated from Greece and much of the Mallah family left Salonika for France, America and Israel. Sarkozy's grandfather, Aron Mallah, nicknamed Benkio, immigrated to France, where he converted to Catholicism and changed his name to Benedict in order to marry a French Christian girl named Adele Bouvier.

Although Benedict integrated fully into French society, he remained close to his Jewish family and culture. Knowing he was still considered Jewish by blood, he hid his family in the village of Marcillac la Croisille in western France during World War II. During the Holocaust, many of the Mallahs who stayed in Salonika or moved to France were deported to concentration and extermination camps. In total, 57 family members were murdered by the Nazis. Testimonies reveal that several revolted against the Nazis.

In 1950, Benedict's daughter, Andree Mallah, married Pal Nagy Bosca y Sarkozy, a descendant of an aristocratic Hungarian family. The couple had three sons, Guillaume, Nicolas and François. After the couple divorced in 1960, Andrée Sarkozy raised her three boys close to their grandfather, Benedict. Nicolas was especially close to Benedict, who was like a father to him.

Sarkozy says he admired his grandfather, and through hours spent listening to his stories of the Nazi occupation, the Maquis (French Resistance), De Gaulle and D-Day, Benedict bequeathed to Nicolas his political convictions.

Sarkozy's family lived in Paris until Benedict's death in 1972, at which point they moved to Neuilly-sur-Seine to be closer to the boys' father, Pal (who changed his name to Paul) Sarkozy.

Various memoirs depict Paul Sarkozy as a father who did not spend much time with his children or help the family monetarily. Nicolas had to sell flowers and ice cream in order to pay for his studies. However, his fascination with politics led him to become the city's youngest mayor and to rise to the top of French and world politics. The rest is history.

It may be a far leap to consider that Sarkozy's Jewish ancestry may have any bearing on his policies vis-a-vis Israel. However, many expect Sarkozy's presidency to bring a dramatic change not only in France's domestic affairs but also in the country's foreign policy in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, there are several reasons that any expectations for a drastic change in the country's Middle East policy, or foreign policy in general, should be downplayed. First, France's new president will spend the lion's share of his time dealing with domestic issues, such as the country's stagnating economy, its social cohesiveness and the rising integration-related crime rate. When he finds time to deal with foreign affairs, Sarkozy will have to devote most of his energy to protecting France's standing in an ever-involved European Union. In his dealings with the United States, Sarkozy will most likely prefer to engage on less-explosive agenda items than the Middle East.

Second, France's foreign policy stems from the nation's interests rooted in reality and influenced by a range of historic, political, strategic and economic considerations. Since Sarkozy's landing at the Elysée on May 16 will not change those, France's foreign policy ship will not tilt so quickly under a new captain.

Third, France's Foreign Affairs Ministry exerts significant weight over the country's policies and agenda. There, nonelected bureaucrats tend to retain an image of Israel as a destabilizing element in the Middle East, rather than the first line of defense of democracy. Few civil servants would consider risking France's interests or increasing chances for "a clash of civilizations" in order to help troubled Israel or Palestine reach peace.

It is fair to predict that France will stay consistent with its support in establishing a viable Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, existing side by side with a peaceful Israel. How to get there, if at all, will not be set by Sarkozy's flagship, but rather he will follow the leadership of the United States and the European Union.

Although Sarkozy's family roots will not bring France closer to Israel, the president's personal Israeli friends may. As interior minister, Sarkozy

shared much common policy ground with former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The two started to develop a close friendship not long ago, and it is easy to observe similarities not only in their ideology and politics but also in their public image. If Netanyahu returns to Israel's chief position, it will be interesting to see whether their personal dynamic will lead to a fresh start for Israel and France and a more constructive European role in the region.

## IDENTITY

### To Be 'Counted' is More Than Just Taking a Number

By Rabbi Karen S. Citrin, May 18, 2007, j. Weekly



The air is muggy and warm at the mikvah in San Francisco. I have stood at the edge of the waters numerous times, a witness to this holy act that completes the path to becoming a Jew. The candidate for conversion enters the living waters of the mikvah, symbolic of her immersion into Jewish tradition. In the same way that the waters surround her, the Jewish people embrace and warmly welcome her into our midst.

For a convert, the mikvah is the culminating step following an intense time of study, reflection, practice and commitment. Our tradition teaches that the convert is more precious to God than the person who is a born a Jew because he came to Judaism on his own accord. Today, we call converts, "Jews by choice" because they have chosen to cast their lot with the Jewish people.

The Jews by choice in our communities are indeed worthy of recognition and praise. We can all learn from them what it means to embrace Judaism and to deliberately count ourselves among the Jewish people.

The rabbis taught that this week's Torah portion, Bamidbar, the first portion in the Book of Numbers, always precedes Shavuot, the holiday when we affirm our commitment to Torah and Judaism. Two reasons are given — one relating to the Hebrew name of this book of the Torah and the other to the English name.

The Hebrew name Bamidbar, which means "in the wilderness," refers to the wilderness of Sinai, the place where Israel received the Torah. The Talmud further states, "Torah was given in the wilderness (bamidbar) to teach that we must consider ourselves open like the wilderness in order to learn Torah." (Nedarim 55b)

The English name refers to the opening lines of this portion in which God instructs Moses to take a census of the whole Israelite community. God says, "Seu et rosh," "take a census," or literally, "lift up the head." (Numbers 1:2)

Rashi commented that God counted Israel because of God's love for them. In other words, just as we count the people and things that matter to us, so God counts every Jew as a partner in the Covenant. The census is a sign that God loves and needs each of us.

It follows then that we would read these verses right before Shavuot, the time when we are asked to stand and be counted, the time when we are asked to embrace Torah. The holiday reminds us that we all stood at Sinai.

We all received Torah. We all were counted. Shavuot concludes the period of counting the omer. For 49 days preceding Shavuot, we are reminded that we must continue to count and be counted.

On Shavuot, we also recall the person whom the rabbis consider the first convert, the first non-Israelite to formally cast her lot and be counted among the Jewish people: Ruth. As Ruth clung to her mother-in-law, Naomi, she uttered the words: "Wherever you go, I shall go; wherever you lodge, I shall lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16) She was the first Jew by choice.

Today we are all Jews by choice. Every Jew alive today, whether born to Jewish parents or not, is faced with decisions about how to be a Jew. All Jews today must make the choice about what kind of Jew we want to be.

Contemporary author, Anita Diamant, has written, "A Jew by choice is not someone who makes a single decision called conversion; a Jew by choice is someone who makes a home inside the act of Jewish choosing." Today, we are all faced with the challenge to feel at home making Jewish choices.

As the time to be counted approaches, think about the Jewish choices you make. Consider the responsibilities that come with being counted — responsibilities to family, community, the Jewish people, the world. Reflect on how being Jewish lifts up your head and your soul.

Like the waters of the mikvah, the Jewish people embrace you.

Bamidbar  
Numbers 1:1 - 4:20  
Hosea 2:1 - 2:22

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## Challah and Rice Cakes

By Tracy Hahn-Burkett, May 22, 2007, [InterfaithFamily.com](http://InterfaithFamily.com)



We were already an interfaith family when my husband and I decided to adopt a baby girl from Korea. A Jew (me) and a non-Jew (him), we had agreed in just one heartfelt conversation to raise our children as Jews. Having successfully worked out those details, we were confident that we could incorporate another culture into our family. We eagerly accepted the challenge of integrating various aspects of Korean culture into our lives so that, as much as would be possible for a couple of white Americans, we could raise our daughter with some understanding of all of the elements of her American-Jewish-Korean identity.

This blend of cultures figured prominently in our plan for a huge celebratory weekend for our daughter's first birthday. We invited friends and family from hundreds of miles away. On Friday, "Emmie" would receive her Hebrew name. That ceremony would be followed the next day by a Korean tol, or first-birthday party. I couldn't wait to mark the real beginning of our multicultural family with this blend of customs and traditions.

The "Weekend of Emmie" began at our small synagogue on Friday night. Friends and family joined us in the cozy, slightly frayed sanctuary to witness our ascent to the bimah (a platform at the front of the sanctuary similar to an altar), where Emmie was to receive her Hebrew name. Our daughter, whose angelic behavior long past her bedtime seemed a miracle in itself, began to squirm, but then she mysteriously became transfixed when the rabbi opened the sacred Ark that held the Torah, the scrolls containing the first five books of the Old Testament. The tradition of welcoming a baby girl with a formal naming ceremony has only recently become popular in some Jewish communities, but as I listened to the rabbi's words in English and Hebrew, I felt an unexpected yet inextricable link between a Jewish history that stretched back millennia and myself, my Korean daughter, her Jewish-born brother and her non-Jewish father. At the oneg, or reception following services, our friends and the congregants took turns, between bites of braided challah and sugary pastries, wishing us mazel tov--congratulations.

Having made it through the previous night's celebration with outstanding behavior from our two young children, I was worried that Saturday's party would not yield more of the same. Nevertheless, we bravely decked out both of our children in their stiff, brightly colored hanboks (traditional Korean clothes), and headed to the Korean restaurant located surprisingly close to our smallish New Hampshire community. Emmie nearly swam in the bright red-and-white dress, jacket and headpiece given to us for this occasion by her foster mother, who had cared for Emmie in her first months of life before we brought her home from Korea. "Jack" also looked somewhat lost in a navy-and-gold boy's hanbok, whose pants kept threatening to slide off of his slim, 4-year-old figure.

Once at the restaurant, 70 family members and friends joined us in commemorating what is a major milestone in Korean culture--although conditions have improved vastly today, many Korean babies historically never survived their first year. We feasted on a variety of Korean foods we have come to know and savor: bulgogi, a slightly sweet beef dish, the spicy pickled cabbage known as kimchi that is daily fare for many Koreans, a traditional rainbow rice cake and other delicacies. Our guests then watched as a bewildered Emmie sat before a large, fruit-laden table and performed the toljabee, the Korean ceremony where the 1-year-old honoree selects from a variety of objects placed before her on the table. The object she chooses is supposed to tell the child's future. We're not really sure what the future holds for Emmie because even with the assistance of the restaurant's Korean proprietor, our unfamiliarity with the ceremony led us to encourage Emmie to grab multiple objects; she may be bound for learning, wealth, or just confusion.

When the guests had finally left, the last of the leftover pastries and rice cake had been consumed, and the weekend ended, I reviewed events in my mind. And I realized that something truly joyous had happened. Yes, Emmie's weekend fulfilled my goal to honor all the aspects of Emmie's heritage. My daughter, who now had three names--one Korean, one English and one Hebrew--had worn the clothes of her ancestors, been welcomed into Judaism in the new tradition of our--now her--people, and smeared frosting from her birthday cake across her face. But what impressed me most about the weekend was that ultimately, it had not been about our being a multicultural family or about my daughter's belonging to different faiths and traditions. What the weekend had really been about was celebrating a child's first birthday with a community of family and friends. People who matter to us--Jews, Christians, individuals of diverse ethnicities--welcomed our daughter to our extended family. Emmie may have three names, but she, like any child, is a single, unique person who we hope will grow up to be a joy to everyone around her.

And those are common themes in every culture.

Note: I have changed my children's first names for the purpose of this article in order to protect their privacy.

## My Grandma and Your Grandma...

By Levi Barlavi, Spring 2007, Presentense Magazine



"When are you going to get married?" is a question I hear constantly from my grandmother now that I'm back in Los Angeles after three years of law school on the East Coast. Mind you I only recently turned twenty-seven. The question used to be, "what are you going to be when you grow up?" That one was a simpler multiple-choice question with two correct answers: a) doctor or b) lawyer. At least I got that one right. Now it is simply "when are you going to get married?" Jewish grandmothers think finding someone is as easy as going to the supermarket and picking out a Cornish hen for Shabbat dinner. "Whatever happened to falling in love?" I ask her. She doesn't have time for that. She wants great-grandchildren.

In considering my experience as a single 20-something Persian Jew living in Los Angeles, my grandmother is one of the first things that comes to mind. The truth is, whether you are Ashkenazi or Sephardic, a Persian Jew or South African, your experience with your grandmother is one of the links that unites the tribe. Grandmothers are in fact part of the great Jewish trifecta: Torah, Israel, and "Nana" as my Ashkenazi brethren refer to them. I'm certain that if any young Jewish ladies visit the Chabad House in Shanghai, there is a grandmother like mine waiting to ask for your phone number to give to her grandson. It's just what they do.

When I was a law student in Washington, D.C., people unfamiliar with the great many Persian Jews living in the United States, Europe, and Israel thought the whole concept of an Iranian Jew was oxymoronic. The reality is that before its Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran housed one of the largest and oldest Jewish communities in the Diaspora. Today, a great deal of them live in Los Angeles.

As a Persian Jew and first generation American, my life, both professional and social, consists of negotiating between three different worlds: American, Iranian, and Jewish. My experience is not unique. Add a dose of Los Angeles superficiality to the mix and you can understand why some young Iranian-American Jews here feel so conflicted. You learn to adapt—if you don't, you're liable to drive yourself crazy. It's a Darwinian thing.

I value privacy, but it is hard to come by in a small insular community like mine. Rumors abound about who is dating whom. Go to a café in Brentwood, and like Cheers, everyone knows your name. Whether you are glad to see each other is a different story. All of a sudden, taking a date to a restaurant an hour away starts to seem like a good idea. Just be sure not to expend all your conversation on the car ride there. The whole experience can become a bit stifling.

Despite this, growing up Persian and Jewish can be very enriching. We Persians do things big. We are big on food, most of us grew up in big families, and we like big parties. We are also a sensitive species. We love to laugh and are not embarrassed to cry. Hugs and kisses from friends and family are the norm. You learn to incorporate these parts of your culture into your life as you grow older. It becomes food for the soul. Assimilation is not a bad thing if it is done right.

My experience reflects the similarities Jewish communities around the world share. Again, I refer back to my grandmother. I liken my grandmother and her friends to traders on the New York Stock Exchange. The commodity they peddle: 20- and 30- something single Iranian Jews. It's a small market but the trading is fierce. Graduate from medical school, and your stock goes up. Move to Silverlake and become an artist and you've relegated yourself to over-the-counter status overnight. When I shared this anecdote with an Argentinean-Jewish friend of mine he laughed. He told me he now understood how similar my whole experience here in Los Angeles was to his situation in Buenos Aires. We both realize that if you allow some of your culture's antiquated ways to get to you, you lose the forest for the trees.

I had dinner with my grandparents the other night. We had barely finished our salads when my grandmother started up again. "When are you going to get married so I can have great-grandchildren?" There is really only one way to answer the question. "Why don't you pick me up a wife when you go to the market and grab dinner for Friday night," I said. She wasn't amused.

## COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

### Threats Can't Stop Tunisian Pilgrimage

By Larry Luxner, May 7, 2007, JTA



Neither tight security nor the threat of a terrorist attack could stop some 5,000 Jews from celebrating the annual Ghriba pilgrimage on the Tunisian island of Djerba.

DJERBA, Tunisia (JTA) -- With hundreds of policemen lining the roads, X-ray machines blocking the entrance to an ancient synagogue and a police helicopter circling overhead, some 5,000 Jews joyously celebrated the annual Ghriba pilgrimage on this Tunisian island. The heavy security at the May 6 event was intended to prevent a repeat of a 2002 terrorist attack against the historic synagogue, which killed 21 German tourists and was believed to be perpetrated by al-Qaida.

Even so, terrorism didn't appear to be a major concern for the Jews -- or the curious Arab onlookers -- who paraded through the streets of Hara Sghira, a small village that is home to the ancient Ghriba synagogue, the oldest in North Africa. "We come every year to celebrate the anniversary of the death of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai," explained Dr. Ouzifa Trabelsi, a UCLA-trained endocrinologist who was born in Djerba and now lives in Paris. "It's just a tradition. It has nothing to do with religion."

Trabelsi, 52, has been coming to Djerba annually for the past 34 years. Another regular is Haim Cohen, an Italian-born Jew of Libyan origin. "Muslims and Jews live so close to each other, speak the same language and have the same traditions," he said. "The Tunisians are tolerant and they welcome all the Israelis coming here."

"When I tell people I'm from Israel, they welcome me with open arms," added Jacqueline Saban, who left Tunisia in 1978 and lives in Beersheba, where she runs a jewelry store with her husband, Avraham. As there are no direct air links between the two countries, Israelis must fly to Tunis via Frankfurt, Paris or Rome, then drive six hours through the desert to Djerba.

Perez Trabelsi, president of the local Jewish community and a distant relation of Ouzifa Trabelsi, said that roughly 9,000 pilgrims came to Djerba in 2000, but that dwindled to virtually zero after the 2002 attack. He speculated that if there were direct flights from Tel Aviv to Tunis, 15,000 to 20,000 Jewish pilgrims might make the trip each year. "We have received no specific threats" from al-Qaida "and we're confident nothing will happen again," he said. "We've already been hit once. After the events of 2002, we decided to start the pilgrimage again."

The colorful procession recalls the memory of a legendary woman named La Ghriba -- Arabic for "the foreigner" -- who lived on the island centuries ago and is hailed as a saint.

Every year, thousands of pilgrims visit Djerba on Lag B'Omer to ask for her intercession. They parade a huge candelabrum called the Grande Menara down the street as women reach out to touch the multicolored silk scarves adorning it. This year the festival featured a chorus of young boys singing everything from "California Dreamin' " to "Yerushalayim Shel Zahav" -- as well as men hawking embroidered caps, a master of ceremonies auctioning off the right to ride next to the Menara, and a venerated old rabbi offering benedictions in Hebrew, Arabic and French.

Of Tunisia's 10.8 million inhabitants, fewer than 2,000 are Jewish. Half still live in Djerba, with the other half spread among the capital and a handful of other cities. David Tal, a member of Israel's Knesset, attended the Ghriba festival and told JTA he felt completely welcome in Tunisia. "I think there's a basis for a relationship between Tunisia and Israel," said Tal, 57, who was born in Rishon Lezion to Tunisian parents. "Israel can assist Tunisia a lot in water, agriculture, high-tech and information. There is absolutely no hatred between our countries, and Tunisia always protected its Jews. The time has arrived for a bilateral relationship."

The highest-ranking Tunisian official at the festivities was Tourism Minister Tijani Haddad, who welcomed 75 local and foreign journalists the day before at a press conference at the nearby Hotel Yadis. Haddad said Tunisia "was one of the first Arab countries to fight extremism" after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, but declined to say what security measures Tunisia was taking amid worries about the growing al-Qaida threat throughout North Africa.

Haddad also didn't answer a question about the possibility of establishing direct air service between Israel and Tunisia, and would not say how much revenue the Ghriba festival generates for Tunisia. "It's not a question of money," he said. "Compared to Tunisia's overall tourism industry, what we get from a gathering like this is nothing. "It's not that we follow a policy like this because we want to make money. On the contrary, we respect our principles even if we don't make any money at all."

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## Weddings Unite Jews Across Cultural Borders

By Erica Dietsche, June 14, 2007, NorthJersey.com



There were lots of numbers to consider at The Great Jewish Wedding Event -- which showcased customs from all over the world -- held recently at the Bergen County YJCC in Washington Township.

\$25,000 -- the amount usually spent on a colorful Yemenite bridal dress.

7 -- the number of generations Ethiopians Jews are required to trace back before marrying to circumvent possible genetic issues.

5,000 -- the approximate number of Jews in India, a country of nearly a billion people.

The numbers and traditions explored were varied, but what they all had in common -- the unity of Jewish people in marriage, and the celebration of that fact -- was the inspiration for this first-ever large-scale event.

Said Miriam Allenson, spokeswoman for the UJA Federation of Northern New Jersey: "We thought, 'How do these three facets of Judaism -- Orthodox, Conservative and Reform -- come together?' It's at happy occasions, it's at weddings."

But like most weddings, the event, which was planned for nearly two years, didn't quite go off without a hitch.

The "bride" in the Bene Israel Indian wedding ceremony was delayed, necessitating a reorganization of the day's events. Interspersed with klezmer music by Alicia Svigals, there was a photography presentation by Zion Ozeri; a discussion of Hasidic weddings by Rabbi Dov Drizin of Valley Chabad in Woodcliff Lake; "The Yemenite Wedding Experience," led by artist Geula Vardi, which featured a dancer from Florida who balanced objects on her head; an Ethiopian coffee ceremony; and a presentation on Moroccan weddings.

But this shift didn't prevent a standing-room-only crowd at the Indian wedding ceremony, led by Romiel Daniel, president of the Indian Jewish Congregation in Long Island and Rego Park Jewish Center in Queens.

Before the ceremony began, Daniel couldn't resist making the crowd laugh about most people's reactions to Indian Jews. " 'How can you be Jewish?' he says many people ask him. 'You come from India!' "

In fact, the country is home to three Jewish communities: the Cochins, who are the fewest with approximately 17 elderly people remaining; the few hundred Baghdadis, who came from Syria and Baghdad in the 19th century; and the Bene Israel, believed to have been in India since 722 B.C.E., when Assyria defeated the Kingdom of Israel. They're the largest constituency.

The event was extremely well-received, says Allenson. "It was such a wonderful time, and what makes it even more special is that it was educational, too."

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## Spain Connects with Jewish History via Sephardic Routes

By Michael Levitin, May 24, 2007, LATimes.com



For Aida Oceransky, life as a Jew in Spain today isn't the silent burden it used to be. When she emigrated here from her native Mexico in 1968, Oceransky didn't dare talk about her family's Ukrainian Jewish past. All the Jews she knew in the 1970s and '80s went to Mass. Even a decade ago, "you couldn't find anything on Judaism in Spain — a magazine, a book, nothing," she said.

Now, more than five centuries after Spain violently expelled its Jews, the country is experiencing a revival of interest in Sephardic heritage — and neither Oceransky nor the 40,000 other Jews living here feel as though they have to whisper about their identity.

In fact, Sephardic culture has seen a boom in Spain in recent years. There's Noah Gordon's international bestseller, "The Last Jew" (set during the Spanish Inquisition), and the 2004 Spanish comedy "Only Human", as well as conferences, music festivals, and even restaurants specializing in Sephardic cuisine. The biggest splash is the government-sponsored initiative known as Caminos de Sefarad, or Sephardic Routes, a network linking 15 medieval Jewish cities across Spain on the first-ever travel itinerary through the diaspora in Spain.

Unlike Berlin and Prague, Czech Republic, and other European cities where a lost Jewish heritage has been a cultural steppingstone for years — and where old Jewish quarters, synagogues and cemeteries are almost mandatory tourist stops — the curiosity in Spain's Jewish sites has grown up almost overnight.

A growing number of tourists is coming to Segovia, a city in Spain's Castile region, not only to see its towering Roman aqueduct but also to get a glimpse of a rediscovered Jewish past. "People want to see the Jewish quarter because it's practically unknown — and because they don't expect it," said Marta Rueda, a guide who once led former Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres on a tour through Segovia's old streets.

Granted, the Jewish cemetery stands on an unmarked hill opposite the town; the old synagogue has been turned into Corpus Christi Church; and about 100 Jewish homes were leveled centuries ago to make way for a vast Gothic cathedral. Nowadays, the most notable Jewish features of Segovia are its modern eateries, such as the Menora Café and El Fogón Sefardí restaurant. Nonetheless, the mere investigation of its Jewish legacy "is something new."

"Even people from Segovia never learned about the Jewish quarter," Rueda said. "Now people want to know their history."

Spain's relationship with its Sephardic legacy has in many ways been a centuries-long struggle against silence. In the Middle Ages, Jews played a major role in the country's success — as astronomers, doctors, merchants and aides to the Catholic monarchy — until King Ferdinand exiled

them and the Muslims with the expulsion edict of 1492.

In the 19th century, Jewish merchants started to trickle back in from Greece, Germany and elsewhere in Europe. They built the first modern synagogue in Madrid in 1916 and many fought on the side of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, which ended with Gen. Francisco Franco taking Fascist control of the country in 1939.

Decades of religious oppression forced the community into the background. It wasn't until 1968, after laws had loosened, that the Spanish council of Jewish communities emerged, giving shape to the new community.

In more recent years emigration from Morocco and Latin America increased Spain's Jewish population to about 40,000. In 1992, Franco's successor, King Juan Carlos I, addressing members of a Madrid synagogue on the 500th anniversary of the Inquisition, formally welcomed the "return home" of Jews to Spain. Since then, Jewish culture, history and identity — like those aspects now visibly promoted on the Sephardic Routes — have enjoyed an almost reinvented status.

"Everything remained unrecognized about the Jews for so many years," said Ana María López, director of the Sephardic Museum in the artist El Greco's famed city of Toledo. The museum is adjoined to El Tránsito Synagogue, a masterpiece of 14th century architecture with ornate rafters and biblical wall inscriptions. Visits to the synagogue and museum have doubled in the last 10 years, now up to 300,000 annually, due to an interest that López believes signals a deeper change in Spaniards' perceptions about their past.

"People realize there were others besides them — and that they were important," she said.

That realization is partly the result of the Network of Jewish Quarters in Spain — Sephardic Routes, which has worked with government, schools and businesses to highlight Jewish heritage.

"This network is about bringing patrimony to light; it's about rehabilitating the physical space and memory of Spain's Jews," said Assumpció Hosta, the general secretary of Sephardic Routes, from her office in Girona, 60 miles north of Barcelona. The organization began here in 1995, in this medieval Catalan city whose narrow, climbing cobblestone streets of the Call, or Jewish quarter, are considered among the best preserved in Europe.

For Girona and other small and medium-size cities like it — from Jaén in the south to Oviedo and Tudela in the north — there are also strong financial incentives for marketing the Jewish past. "The hotels are happier. The restaurants are happier. We couldn't do this while Franco was alive, and when the country was still in poverty," Hosta added. "We didn't have Einstein, but we had [12th century rabbi and philosopher] Maimonides. Now there is a lot of curiosity."

There is also, inevitably, some disappointment for travelers hoping to see more of Spain's Sephardic past than what physically exists today. In the great walled city of Ávila, 50 miles west of Madrid, a medieval synagogue has been converted into a chic but cozy hotel named Hospedería La Sinagoga, with Sephardic-motif double rooms renting out for about \$100 a night.

In Oviedo, the small Asturian capital near the north-central coast, 19th century architects built the Campoamor Theater over the Jewish cemetery, and only several plaques now stand demarcating the former — now unrecognizable — Jewish quarter.

Indeed, Sephardic Routes has its critics, especially from those who see a dangerous tendency in focusing on "the archeological Jew" and not

paying enough attention to the living Jewish community of today.

"They talk about Jews without [their being] hardly any around," said Nily Schorr Levinsohn, who works in media relations for Catalonia's Jewish community of 6,000, based in Barcelona. Schorr Levinsohn thinks that Spain, burdened by guilt over its history with the Jews, now genuinely wants to reflect and learn about what it lost. But "today's Jews aren't a part of this process."

Considering that only a few decades ago Spain still upheld laws forbidding Jews to practice their religion, the country has come a long way in reconciling with its anti-Semitic past. Nowadays Spaniards can tune into Radio Sefarad, read Jewish magazines and even catch a weekly culture TV show called "Shalom."

Surveys by the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Democratic Committee still consistently show Spain as one of the most anti-Semitic countries in Europe. Blatant pro-Palestinian coverage in the press fuels the sense that many Spaniards are cool toward Israel and Jews in general. The Catholic Church to this day resists releasing documents about the lands and properties acquired from Jews after their expulsion in the 15th century.

That aside, the point is that on a broader level things have started to change as visitors to Spain, and the Spaniards themselves, are finally learning about the history of Sephardic Jews.

"For many years, people hid the story that connects Jews to Christians in Spain," said Oceransky, who is the president of her 130-person Jewish community in Asturias. "Most Spaniards have never, never seen a Jew. Their only image is what they see about Israel on television and a few facts they learn about the Holocaust — mostly transmitted through the Catholic Church.

"What we want is that the people come to know us — to know what Jews are and to understand the marks Jews left here."

## ARTS & CULTURE

### A Yiddisher Rasta Man

By Boaz Arad, June 22, 2007, YNetNews.com



An old bus in Romania is on its way to the MTV Awards ceremony, containing joints the size of dreadlocks and Romanian massage therapists working hard. Amidst all of this, Boaz Arad manages to conduct an interview with Sean Paul. They speak about the Holocaust, Nazism, his Jewish grandfather, Jerusalem and Beyonce's behind. The most famous Jamaican artist since Bob Marley is making his way to Zion. And he's just as excited as we are.

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This is not how it was supposed to go, but nothing is as it's supposed to be in Romania, the twilight zone of Europe. The interview with the Jamaican superstar - due to a series of impossible coincidences including the fact that this reporter is the only one at the newspaper with dreadlocks and the huge bodyguard who loves Israelis because "they make amazing weapons" – is taking place in a smoking old bus.

And Sean Paul? Just as you would imagine him. A stoner. After the first joint it became clear that this interview - which quickly turned into a long conversation, pausing only for a frenzied nap - was going to take a very unusual course. After the first drag, he wanted to know where the best place to eat hummus in Jerusalem is. After the next drag he wanted to know what the opening hours are at the Western Wall. On the second joint, he talked about the Holocaust, Auschwitz.

This musician, probably the most famous Jamaican since Bob Marley, one of the more successful black artists in the world today, does not need to be taken to Yad Vashem on his way to the Dead Sea. He's been to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, seen and cried through "Schindler's List" twice. "Whenever I perform in Germany", the dreadlocked rapper said, "I get the shivers". He paused for a moment, took out his cell phone, and showed me a black and white photograph of a British soldier in uniform on the screen.

"You see, this is my grandfather. When I land in Germany I immediately think of him. He went all the way from Jamaica to Europe to fight the Nazis. He was injured in battle and taken prisoner. Nobody knew what happened to him until the end of the war when they found him in one of the prison camps and brought him home. Everyone was very worried about him, they were scared that the Nazis would find out that he was Jewish and murder him."

### ***You're kidding me. You're Jewish?***

"My grandfather's family on my father's side is one of the biggest Jewish families on the island. They escaped from Spain during the Inquisition, arrived in Portugal and in the 17th century immigrated to Jamaica. But I have no connection to all that. I grew up in a Catholic home. On my mother's side I have a Chinese grandmother. My Jewish grandfather, who died recently, never spoke to me about Judaism. All that he cared about when he came back from the war with a medal was women and rum. He would sit and drink rum all day like crazy. Last week I was at a bar mitzvah for the first time in my life."

### ***Whose bar mitzvah?***

"A kid whose dad is a multi-millionaire and owns the biggest gasoline company in America. They rented one of the most expensive banquet halls in New York and invited me to perform for 150 thirteen-year-olds. It was crazy. A lot of money was poured into the event and I was really surprised by it all. I always presumed that this is a religious ceremony that is held with your family, and suddenly I'm there with people like Mel Gibson and Neil Diamond walking around drinking champagne. It felt more like a wedding. I told the kid that I'm just as excited as he was, finally I'm doing a bar mitzvah."

***In Israel when a musician performs at a bar mitzvah, it means that his career is not going too well.***

"I'll do a bar mitzvah a day with the money they paid me."

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### **Dad takes a trip**

It is doubtful that Sean Paul will have the time to do a bar mitzvah when he's in Israel. Not even a little "brit milah" (circumcision ceremony). His visit to Israel will be short: he's scheduled to arrive on June 28 for a concert

that same night and by the next day he'll already be in Jordan. He does not often come to this area and his many mustached fans in our neighboring countries ("I don't know why I have so many fans there, maybe it's because I look a little like an Arab") are not happy with the fact that he found the time to come to Israel.

Sean Paul is busy. He has just completed a round-the-world tour with his third album "The Trinity" and for the last couple of months, he has been dividing his time between his Jamaican studio where he's working on his fourth album, and doing off-tour shows in remote countries like Israel and Romania where they are prepared to pay him lots of money to come in between albums.

Unlike most Jamaican dancehall artists, Sean Paul does not come from a poor neighborhood. He grew up in one of the affluent neighborhoods of Kingston. His mother is an artist and his father was a Jamaican water polo champion until he got into trouble with the law. "He was a drug dealer," says Sean Paul. "He had a small plane that he would use to smuggle marijuana to Miami, coming back with color TVs and VCRs. Then on a flight one day, the plane ran out of fuel and crashed in the swamps of Florida. He got out okay and loaded the ganja onto a rubber dinghy. He started rowing and after a while, fell asleep. The American Sea Patrol caught him."

Sean Paul played water polo too, worked at a bank and studied hotel keeping ("the only reason I stayed was because 80 percent of the class were women"), but he always dreamed of making music. When he first held a microphone in his hand, he realized that this was it. Turning his dreadlocks into braids and bringing beautiful Jamaican women into his video clips – a star was born.

Sexy, exotic and with a foreign accent - this was exactly what the dying hip-hop scene needed to bring it back to life. In the last three years, Sean Paul has received three Billboard Music Awards, two MTV Music Awards, one Grammy Award, and three International Reggae Awards. And now he is in Romania to collect the MTV (Romania) award for the best international artist.

### **A legend on grass**

He's a nice guy, devoid of celebrity airs, and not just because he keeps offering me drags from his joint. For two hours he questioned me about Israel, and it seems that he really is interested. His dancehall musician friends Capleton and Buju Banton visited Israel earlier this year, loved it and went back with lots to tell.

Sean Paul needs to be sure, for example, that the church in Jerusalem where Jesus was buried really exists. He's not sure how much he can rely on Banton's descriptions – the guy smokes even more ganja than him. And, anyway, he saw a program on the Discovery channel where they spoke about a different burial spot altogether.

***Did your friends also mention demonstrations were held to boycott their concerts? The Israeli lesbian and gay community were not exactly enthusiastic about their songs that call for burning gays.***

"Yeah, that part of dancehall is definitely a problem. It comes from the inability to understand that there are people who live a very different lifestyle from yours. Personally, I have no part with that. I will not tell people how to live and who to get into bed with. It's their choice, not mine. I understand that gays were insulted by this, and they should know too, that people like Banton and Capleton don't really mean it. Violent words like those are part of our violent culture. Their aim is to shock. It's like when Iggy Pop went on stage and spread blood all over himself, or when Ozzy Osbourne ate a bat on stage. It's theatre. They're not really going to burn gays. The problem is that they say it too often, then the whole thing goes out of control. There's no balance. The gays get

angry, dancehall shows overseas are cancelled, and then all the kids in Jamaica get even angrier. They say "What's this? The gays are declaring war on us?" Then they shout "burn them" even louder.

In Jamaica, if you don't play it tough, then you're out."

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## **The Vanishing Argentine Jews**

**In Nathan Englander's long-awaited second book, the son of a Jewish prostitute chisels away at the past.**

**By Sandee Brawarsky, June 1, 2007, The Jewish Week**



Nathan Englander's much-anticipated first novel begins and ends in darkness, in a walled-off corner of a cemetery the Argentine Jewish community would like to forget. This is the burial ground of the Society of the Benevolent Self, once the synagogue of Jewish pimps, prostitutes and other underworld figures. The wealthy and respectable offspring of Jews with names like Hezzi Two-Blades and Henya the Mute prefer to wipe out traces of their less respectable background, anxious that they have enough to worry about in the dangerous times of 1976, during Argentina's Dirty War.

Kaddish Poznan, the son of a prostitute, is hired to sneak into the walled-off section of the cemetery after midnight and chisel away their names from the tombstones. As the prosperous daughter of another prostitute explains to him, "Which man is better off — the one without a future or the one without a past?"

"The Ministry of Special Cases" (Knopf) is a novel of ideas, a historical novel that at times feels like one of magical realism, but it's the story of a society gone awry, when surreal things can happen. The son of Kaddish and Lillian Poznan "is disappeared," a term understood to mean the government-sanctioned kidnapping of individuals, with no traces, no answers about their fate and no accountability by the authorities.

The novel is a departure in subject and tone from Englander's award-winning and best-selling collection of stories, "For the Relief of Unbearable Urges," published in 1999 when he was 29. In both, Jews figure prominently, but while the stories teased out differences between religious and secular Jews, the novel is about, among other things, community, identity, memory and fathers and sons.

Kaddish is the name given to Poznan by a rabbi who refused to come into Poznan's home (because of his mother's line of work) when he was summoned to give the sickly infant a blessing. The rabbi suggested that his name be changed to Kaddish to ward off the Angel of Death. The name turns out to be both blessing and curse. Throughout his life, Poznan is a man who's kept out, relegated to the outside. For him, "It's a bully's heaven we have been given, a coercive place where all the self-righteous can float around judging, voyeurs with wings."

Plastic surgery plays into the story, and Poznan is paid for one gravestone effort with a nose job for him and his wife performed by a prestigious plastic surgeon, also the son of Benevolent Self members. They get their Jewish

noses erased, chiseled off. Kaddish's surgery goes well, altering his Jewish-looking profile to make him a handsome Argentine, but his wife opens her eyes to the nightmare of a terrible job performed by a student, leaving her with a nose much worse than she began with. She then faces a larger nightmare when her son Pato is taken away and then vanishes. Although her nose is fixed again to make her look beautiful, she misses seeing the image of her son — who also had a prominent nose — when she looks in the mirror. Her pain is overwhelming.

Lillian does everything she can to get her son back, regularly visiting the corrupt offices of the Ministry of Special Cases. She loses her job in an insurance office when she steals the private telephone number of a general who was a client and goes to see him. The unnamed general denies the kidnappings and tells her, "Powerful as I am — I admit it — I can't undo what's not been done. I can't make your son from nothing. You are Jews. Go to the river and mix him from clay. People from nothing is a Jewish affair."

Englander succeeds in creating a world that is darkly compelling. He writes bold and beautiful sentences, sometimes with humor embedded in his language and juxtapositions. Jewish expressions, teachings and aphorisms are woven into the way characters speak.

"The story is both real and absurd," Englander, 37, says in an interview with *The Jewish Week* in an Upper West Side coffee shop near Columbia University, where he spends much time writing.

While he has worked on the novel for almost a decade, its publication has timely elements, much to the author's surprise.

"I ended up with an accidental political position," he says. "I deeply believe that in a democracy, you can't just arrest people — people have a right to be entered into the legal system, charged or freed." He notes that it's terrifying that the idea of habeas corpus is now being debated in America.

The "Jewish writer question" is one he finds irrelevant, although he is asked it frequently and has ready answers. He's adamant about not wanting to be seen in a limited way; he doesn't see being Jewish as being "other" and he doesn't see the world from a specifically Jewish point of view. His obligation, he says, is to the story and to what it demands. When the first book collection was published, much was made of the fact that the long-haired author grew up attending a Long Island yeshiva and had left that world. In the stories, he wrote about Jews from all angles.

With short hair now, he says that he no longer looks like "a roadie for the Allman Brothers." He describes himself as "a lapsed atheist lately" and then adds, "I couldn't be any more Jewish."

The first sentence of the novel is about Jews; in fact, the very first word is Jews. He writes, "Jews bury themselves the way they live, crowded together, encroaching on one another's space. The headstones were packed tight, the bodies underneath elbow to elbow and head to toe."

Englander visited Argentina in 1991, traveling there for the wedding of friends he'd met in Israel and then joining them on their honeymoon. He began the novel years later, working "off of these vague memories of place," he explains. He speaks no Spanish, but since beginning the novel has mastered a lot of Argentine history. He returned to Argentina only when the novel was finished.

The author moved back to New York in 2001 from Jerusalem, where he had lived for five years. He explains that the book was shaped by the years he lived in Jerusalem.

"Jerusalem interrupts you. Time is not unbroken," he says. "I have a love of cities, complicated cities." He has been back to visit, but is not drawn to live there again.

"I love New York. I'm a city loyalist. When I was living in Jerusalem, there was no other city," he says. In the novel, he's drawn to the question of what happens when a beloved city changes.

Englander was awarded the Bard Fiction Prize, a PEN/Faulkner Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 2004 was a Fellow at the Cullman Center at the New York Public Library. He has been working exclusively on the novel for more than eight years, working long hours every day, although he admits he is also obsessively devoted to yoga. For him, writing is an organic process of "imagining and imagining and rewriting to see if a world could be built where these things happen."

"To lift up my head at the end of the book, to see how close it is to my heart, to see how much the Dirty War affected me, how I feel about those mothers," he reflects.

Interestingly, the Society for the Benevolent Self has basis in history. As reported by Isabel Vincent in "Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced Into Prostitution in the Americas," there was in fact a mutual-aid society in Argentina known as Chesed Shel Emet, Benevolent Society of Truth. The organization was established and maintained by Jewish women, mostly from the shtetls of Eastern Europe, who had been literally sold into slavery by Jewish criminal gangs from 1869 until the late 1930s.

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## **The Lost Jewish Culture**

**The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950–1492**  
**translated, edited, and with an introduction by Peter Cole**  
**Princeton University Press, 548 pp., \$50.00; \$19.95 (paper)**

By Harold Bloom, June 28, 2007, JThe New York Review of Books



1.

I count at least seven great Jewish Diasporas: Babylon-Persia; Hellenistic Alexandria; Muslim and Christian Spain, including Provence-Catalonia; Renaissance Italy; Eastern Europe—Russia; Austria-Hungary together with Germany; the United States. Peter Cole's *The Dream of the Poem* devotes itself to the crown of Jewry's literary achievement in Muslim and Christian Spain: the blooming of a Hebrew poetry that, at the very best, could rival the magnificences of Scripture such as "Song of the Red Sea" (Exodus 15:1b–18), the "War Song of Deborah and Barak" (Judges 5:1–31), and "David's Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan" (2 Samuel 1:19–27).

The central figures in Cole's anthology are great by any relevant standards: Shmu'el HaNagid (called the Nagid), Shelomo Ibn Gabirol, Moshe Ibn Ezra, Yehuda HaLevi—all of Muslim Spain (circa 950–circa 1140)—and Avraham Ibn Ezra, Yehuda Alharizi, and Todros Abulafia who lived in Christian Spain and Provence (circa 1140–1452). These seven poets are fully the equal of such Spanish Renaissance poets as Garcilaso de la Vega, Fray Luis de León, and San Juan de la Cruz. Luis De León was, incidentally, of a *converso* family, or Jews compelled in 1492 to become Christians or be exiled. He edited the mystical prose of Saint Teresa of Ávila. Teresa herself, partly Jewish by descent, had to endure investigation by the Inquisition, while Luis de León was imprisoned some four years.

If he had been born just two generations earlier, Luis de León would have been another of the canonical Hebrew poets of Spain. But, with that paradox, I turn to the history of Hebrew poetry, first in Muslim Spain and then in the darker Christian Spain. That "darker" refers to the persecution of Jews and Moors, but the persecution in some sense extended to most of the Spaniards in Christian Spain from the seventeenth century on to the death of the fascist dictator Francisco Franco in 1975.

The Muslim conquest of Spain began in 711 under the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled from Damascus. They sent an army of mainly North African Berbers into the Iberian peninsula, which was then ruled by Visigoths who had long since replaced the Romans, under whom Jews first had come to Spain. In the second half of the eighth century the heroic military leader Abd al-Rahman I gained control over Arabic Spain, or al-Andalus, and set up his capital in Córdoba, where his benign treatment of Jews (and Christians) led to their thorough transition to Arabic culture, and helped make Córdoba an extraordinary urban civilization throughout the tenth century.

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The extraordinary rebirth of major Hebrew poetry among the Andalusian Jews, brilliantly set out by Peter Cole, needs to be seen, in part, as a response to their complex linguistic situation. In Roman Spain their daily language primarily had been Latin with some remnants of Aramaic, rather than Hebrew. In Muslim Iberia they mostly adopted Arabic, the international lingua franca. At the same time, a modified Latin, generally called Romance, evolved into the Old Castilian that would become the main spoken language of Christian Spain, including the Sephardi Jews living there; in the diaspora after the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, it was called Ladino (a word for Latin). In Muslim Spain, however, the daily Jewish language, both learned and vernacular, became almost entirely Arabic. Without Arabic poetry and its traditions, the Hebrew poets of Spain could not have come into being. A kind of Judeo-Arabic, composed in Hebrew characters, became the universal Jewish means of writing—except for poetry, which was written in Hebrew. There remained an archaic biblical element in common discourse in Spain—but this was an upper-class phenomenon, and the poets are not likely to have spoken Hebrew, which thus became a literary as well as a sacred language. The precursor texts to the great Hebrew poetry of Muslim Spain were therefore a strange emulsion of the Hebrew Bible and classical Arabic literature.

The elevated style of Hebrew poetry common to the major writers of early Muslim Spain—HaNagid, Ibn Gabirol, Moshe Ibn Ezra, and HaLevi—was abrogated by the changed political situation after 1146, when Berber Fundamentalists captured the southern Iberian peninsula, and the Jews fled north to Christian Provence and Spain, where they were no longer surrounded by spoken Arabic. Hebrew then became the prevalent written language, not only in poetry but in daily affairs, for later poets such as Avraham Ibn Ezra, Alharizi, Todros Abulafia, and their successors down to the Expulsion in 1492. Sublimity was replaced by a language resembling what the scholar Dan Pagis characterized as "a tapestry of medieval life, both generally and specially Jewish." If there is a more Chaucerian flavor to the poetry I also feel a sense of loss. Yehuda HaLevi seems to have been the final stand of a high rhetoric worthy of the Hebrew Bible.

2.

Peter Cole, an American poet living in Jerusalem, is a skilled translator of Arabic as well as of Hebrew poetry. His book's title is taken from its epigraph, which is a poignant observation by the most eminent of living Palestinian poets, Mahmoud Darwish:

*Andalus...might be here or there, or anywhere...a meeting place of strangers in the project of building human culture.... It is not only that there was a Jewish-Muslim coexistence, but that the fates of the two people were similar.... Al-Andalus for me is the realization of the dream of the poem.*

The "similar fates" were that both Muslims and Jews faced a choice between conversion or enforced exile when Christians reconquered Spain, and the option of conversion proved to be fraudulent. Both Jewish and Muslim converts were continually regarded as backsliders: to be investigated, tortured, and frequently burned alive. Christians in Spain produced no tradition of tolerance of other faiths, since they saw Jews as recalcitrant unbelievers and Christ-killers and regarded Muslims as unregenerate heretics. In Islamic al-Andalus, Muslim rulers regarded Jews and Christians as People of the Book, the *dhimmi*, and asked only that they abandon secular power to Muslims. In theory, that is still Islam's position toward Jews and Christians.

It seems not at all accidental that Part One of Cole's book, which collects the best Hebrew poetry of the roughly two centuries of Muslim Spain, between the tenth and twelfth centuries, is far stronger aesthetically than the 350 years of Jewish literary achievement that followed in Christian Spain and Provence. The sense of exile increases in the poetry of Christian Spain, and an aura of cultural decline surrounds even the major figures. Al-Andalus, in Cole's judgment, had made possible a kind of Jewish "cultural redemption":

*For in opening their lives to the entire expanse of Greco-Arabic and Hebrew learning, the dictionally pure Jewish poets of Cordoba, Granada, and Saragossa carried out an act of profound, if paradoxical, cultural redemption. As they translated both the essence of their knowledge and the effects of Arabic poetry into an innovative Hebrew verse—and in the process risked loss of linguistic and religious self to immersion in the foreign—the Hebrew poets of Spain found, or founded, one of the most powerful languages of Jewish expression postbiblical literature has known.*

That eloquently balanced observation justifies Cole's description of the Arab Andalusian period as a Golden Age of Hebrew poetry, and the subsequent Christian era as a Silver Age. Cole has few illusions about "tolerance" in either society, and he declines to idealize the Jewish experience even in Muslim Spain. The catastrophe of 1492 was uniquely a Roman Catholic imposition upon the Jews (and "Moors"). But there had also been various debacles for the Jews in al-Andalus, including a Muslim popular uprising in Granada in 1066 that became a large-scale massacre of Jews.

*The Dream of the Poem* touches often upon the political dilemmas of the Jews of Sefarad, a Hebrew place-name that in the Bible evidently means Sardis, capital of Lydia and the cultural center of Asia Minor from about 650 to 550 BCE. But from the eighth century onward, the Jews took Sefarad to refer to Spain. The greatest of twentieth-century Catalan poets, Salvador Espriu, used it as his own word for Spain in ironic protest against the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. The darker irony is that Franco believed himself to be of Jewish origin, while Espriu merely identified himself with the Sephardis exiled from Spain, or incinerated there as Marranos.

One truly lasting benefit that the rise of Islam gave to Jews was the transformation of a mostly agricultural people into skilled artisans, merchants, and eventually moneylenders. Here too there is an irony: Koran 9:29 called upon the Peoples of the Book to pay financial tribute to their Muslim overlords. Through what became standard exegesis, the consequence was a high rate of taxation, difficult for agricultural laborers

to sustain, which impelled Jews to pursue other kinds of work.

The literary culture of Cole's Hebrew poets was at least as much Arabic as it was biblical, or rather Jewish religious tradition fused miraculously with Greco-Arabic modes of thought, feeling, and expression. Since the Romance element in Spanish and Provençal literature also augmented this fusing process, the results are perpetually astonishing. The seven great poets of Cole's *Dream* provoke love in any reader of Hebrew literature; and by another miracle of Cole's own creation, in any reader of little or no Hebrew who directly confronts the work of this major poet-translator.

How could this Hebrew Renaissance have first occurred in medieval Muslim and then Christian Spain? The aesthetic splendor of Arabic poetry, from well before the Koran through that scripture's prose poetry—an inadequate term—on to the Muslim verse and rhymed prose of al-Andalus, was the immediate catalyst for the Hebrew poetry of Spain. What modern scholars in Spain called *convivencia* is the background for the literary miracle. "Dwelling together," the word's literal meaning, is carefully distinguished by Cole from what we call "tolerance" these days. *Convivencia* implies mutual influences that cover the distance from creative misreadings to dangerous rivalries. The Muslims protected the Peoples of the Book, but maintained strict sovereignty over them. When the Christians reconquered the Iberian peninsula they enforced the second-class status of the Jews and Muslims even more strongly, until at last the Sephardis and Moors were either exiled or compelled to submit to dubious conversions. Cole, with his judicious balance, gives the best account of *convivencia* I have encountered:

*At its best, the culture gave Jews greater religious, social, economic, and intellectual freedom than they knew in any other medieval (non-Muslim) society; at its worst, it led to heavy taxation and serious oppression. When the bottom fell out of it, forced conversion, emigration, and slaughter weren't long in coming. Its limitations notwithstanding, convivencia has been described as the defining issue in the history of al-Andalus, and it resulted in a major renaissance of Arabic and Hebrew literature and learning, and in an early flowering of Spanish culture.*

Religious, social, economic, and intellectual freedom: without political power, these eventually could not suffice, and catastrophe ensued. What vanished was a Hebraic cultural cosmos, which has been equaled only a few times in the three-thousand-year history of the Jews. The Andalusian miracle mutated into the tragedy of Sefarad, and yet it had lasted for more than half a millennium, while the period of major Jewish poetry in German only endured from Heinrich Heine's arrival in Paris (1831) to Paul Celan's suicide at barely fifty (1970). Five hundred and forty years awesomely overwhelms one hundred and forty, but then the literary achievement of German-speaking Jewry was more in prose than in verse.

3.

Agon, the contest for supremacy throughout ancient Greek culture, necessarily filtered into Greco-Arabic speculation and aesthetic adventure. In the Hebrew poets of Spain, the struggle was first conceived as one of the demands of the Covenant with Yahweh, then joined itself to the ancient quarrel of philosophy with poetry, to Plato's wrestling against Homer, and to the more intimate struggle of Pindar and the Athenian tragedians with the Homeric poems, which had become the basic text of the Greeks. When Shmu'el HaNagid, the heroic founder of greatness in Sefarad's Hebrew poetry, called himself the New David he might as well also have been thinking of his role as an amalgam of Achilles and Odysseus, the rival tradition's David and Samuel.

Peter Cole first received recognition as a translator for his *Selected Poems* of HaNagid and then of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, who came to HaNagid as a disciple but left after a temperamental dispute with the warrior-statesman poet. Cole's publishing history suggests a personal preference for HaNagid and Ibn Gabirol since only with *The Dream of the Poem* does he present the work of Moshe Ibn Ezra, the technical master of Sefarad's Hebrew poetry, and of Yehuda HaLevi, the most renowned and beloved figure in the group. They mean much to Cole, but do not inspire him as do the heroic HaNagid and the self-tormented intellectual Ibn Gabirol. Far less informed in this than Cole, I independently share his priorities.

HaNagid brings sublimity back to Hebrew battle poetry, while Ibn Gabirol sets the archetype for spiritual turbulence in all subsequent Jewish poetry. Moshe Ibn Ezra, with whom Robert Browning identified, had to flee Granada in the early 1090s. Moving about restlessly in the Christian Spain of the north, while mourning for a lost Andalusia, Moshe Ibn Ezra can be seen as living out a darker version of Browning's self-exile in Italy.

Cole never makes overt his reservations about Yehuda HaLevi, still the best-known Hebrew Spanish poet, partly because of his prose masterwork, the *Kuzari*, an aggressive argument for Judaism's truth, but more for his romantic life-story. Driven out of Andalusia in the eleventh century, HaLevi went north to Christian lands and became the Jewish poet of Toledo and also served as medical doctor for the Castilian court. Brilliantly, he quoted Jeremiah the Prophet: "We heal Babel, but it is beyond healing" (51:9). When Toledo erupted in a pogrom, HaLevi left and went on further wanderings, during which he became alienated from Arabic culture. He began to return to biblical poetics, and in a pattern he both exemplified and remodeled to long for Zion. His legendary death, probably aboard a ship from Alexandria bound for the land that had been (and now again has become) Israel, is an abiding myth of Jewish nationalism.

4.

HaNagid (993–1056), called Naghrela ("the dark one") by awed Arabs, improbably became the leader of all Andalusia's Jewry (*nagid* means governor and is the source of his name). The poet who called himself the David of his age then became, in 1037, vizier of the Muslim kingdom of Granada and commander in chief of its Islamic armed forces. For sixteen out of the next eighteen years, his power, second only to that of the Berber king of Granada, remained all but absolute, until he died of exhaustion, in his early sixties.

The faithful warrior-statesman startles us because his poetry represents a throwback, after a thousand years, to the warlike ethos of the Book of Judges, of Second Samuel, and of the Psalms of David. The spirit of the prophet Deborah, exultant in the grand battle ode of Judges 5, reincarnates itself in the courageous HaNagid. Here are excerpts from the King James Version of Deborah's victorious song:

*Then sang Deborah and Barak the son of Abinoam on that day, saying,  
Praise ye the LORD for the avenging of Israel, when the people willingly offered themselves.  
Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes; I, even I, will sing unto the LORD; I will sing praise to the LORD God of Israel.  
LORD, when thou wentest out of Seir, when thou marchedst out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, the clouds also dropped water.  
The mountains melted from before the LORD, even that Sinai from before the LORD God of Israel.  
In the days of Shamgar the son of Anath, in the days of Jael, the highways were unoccupied, and the travellers walked through byways.  
The inhabitants of the villages ceased, they ceased in Israel, until that I Deborah arose, that I arose a mother in Israel.  
...  
And the princes of Issachar were with Deborah; even Issachar, and also Barak: he was sent on foot into the valley. For the divisions of Reuben there were great thoughts of heart.  
Why abodest thou among the sheepfolds, to hear the bleatings of the flocks? For the divisions of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.  
Gilead abode beyond Jordan: and why did Dan remain in ships? Asher continued on the sea shore, and abode in his breaches.  
Zebulun and Naphtali were a people that jeopardated their lives unto the death in the high places of the field.  
The kings came and fought, then fought the kings of Canaan in Taanach by the waters of Megiddo; they took no gain of money.  
They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera. The river of Kishon swept them away, that ancient river, the river Kishon. O my soul, thou hast trodden down strength.*

Compare Deborah's song to Peter Cole's translation of HaNagid's description of his victories in "The War with Yaddayir"—Yaddayir was the cousin of the king of Grenada who sought to usurp the throne. In a mosaic of allusions to the Hebrew Bible, particularly Psalms, HaNagid shrewdly avoids referring to the Song of Deborah, which is not to be surpassed in Hebrew. A first sampling of Cole's power as poet-translator

properly can be from the two final stanzas of "The War with Yaddayir":

*I am, I answered, the David of my age!  
He responded: Is Saul, too, with the prophets?  
And I told him:  
The heir of Merari, Sitri, and Assir,  
Elkanah, Mishael, Elzaphan, and Assaf!  
How could a poem  
In my mouth be improper  
to the God who heals my wound?*

There is nothing here as sublime as "Zebulun and Naphtali were a people that jeopardied their lives unto the death in the high places of the field" or "They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera." But the Song of the prophet Deborah, and her captain, Barak, is the oldest and possibly the best poem in the Hebrew language. Like Shelley at the close of his "Ode to the West Wind," Cole silently addresses HaNagid and says: "*Be through my lips/The trumpet of a prophecy*" (italics mine). Israeli Hebrew poets tend not to compose battle odes: Deborah, King David, and HaNagid are high points of a tradition made mostly by themselves. Cole becomes something like a major Jewish American poet when HaNagid dismisses an Idiot Questioner with "I am, I answered, the David of my age!" and pledges his victory hymn to please Yahweh, who was himself a Man of War.

There are two other major kinds of poems by Shmu'el HaNagid, first erotic lyrics, satires, and elegies; and second, epigrams expressing further reflections upon mortality. Like the writers of Arabic love songs, HaNagid and many Hebrew poets who follow him seem to celebrate a bisexuality, though rather ambiguously, since social conventions govern what can be said. Even Shelomo Ibn Gabirol, whom Cole appears to rank second only to HaNagid, is an altogether different poet from the vizier-general. A tubercular, bitter personality and yet a sublime visionary, Ibn Gabirol can be thought of as a Hebrew Leopardi, though a Leopardi who is a Yahwistic theist rather than a Lucretian nihilist.

The masterpiece of Ibn Gabirol is the rhapsodic and Neoplatonic *Kingdom's Crown*, fully translated in Cole's *Selected Poems of Gabirol*, and, sadly, represented in *The Dream of the Poem* only by a ten-page excerpt. But even here, Cole catches the acutely individual accent of one of the major Hebrew poets:

*I'm ashamed, my God,  
and abashed to be standing before you,  
for I know that as great as your might has been,  
such is my utter weakness and failing;  
as exalted as your power has been and will be,  
such is the depth of my poverty;  
as whole as your perfection is,  
so is my knowledge flawed.  
For you are one and alive;  
almighty, abiding, strong and wise;  
You are the Lord my God—  
and I am a clod of dirt and a worm;  
dust of the ground and a vessel of shame;  
a speechless stone;*

*a passing shadow;  
a wind blown-by that won't return;  
a spider's poison;  
a lying heart uncut for his Lord;  
a man of rages;  
a craftsman of scheming, and haughty,  
corrupt and impatient in speech,  
perverse in his ways and impetuous.*

This eloquent pathos again makes me hear in Ibn Gabirol a forerunner to Leopardi. Both poets, theist and nihilist, pragmatically close the incredible, not-to-be-traversed distance between a normative Judaism and Epicureanism. It is as though Walt Whitman, Lucretian and self-reliant, were to be indistinguishable from T.S. Eliot, self-proclaimed royalist, Anglo-Catholic, and classicist. I myself do not discern much of a difference between "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and its revisionary child in *The Waste Land*. Leopardi contemplates a different sublime in the abyss of nothingness; Ibn Gabirol desperately yearns for a sublime revelation of Yahweh, but the shattering alienation of the poet's wounded consciousness from the height emerging in the poem unites Leopardi and Ibn Gabirol.

5.

I don't share in Peter Cole's implicit preference for Moshe Ibn Ezra over his student Yehuda HaLevi, but to choose between these two strong poets is a difficult decision. Moshe Ibn Ezra is not the equal of HaNagid or of Ibn Gabirol in originality and yet is a more nuanced artist than either. As Cole remarks, the central theme of Ibn Ezra's life and poetic art is exile. Twice he had to flee Granada, first as a child during the Muslim uprising against HaNagid's son and successor in 1066, and permanently a few years after the Berber invasion of 1090. The second half of his long life was spent in the Christian north, where he was afflicted by nostalgia for the lost cultural glories of Arabic-Hebraic Andalusia.

Sometimes the unfused erotic and devotional elements in Moshe Ibn Ezra baffle me, but Peter Cole is extraordinarily useful as poet-translator, catching the remarkable nuances of Ibn Ezra's attitude of supplication, and the echoes of HaNagid, stronger poet and personality:

*Let it set the sun as a crown on my head,  
or make the moon my golden crescent—  
Orion a bracelet around my wrist,  
its glowing children about me my necklace,  
I will not come to desire its power,  
not for a home beyond the stars.  
My longing instead is to lay my threshold  
near the threshold of learned men:  
all I want is to move toward them,  
although my iniquity holds me back  
among a people that does not know me;  
with whom I have no part or ease—  
for when I greet them with kisses of peace,  
they say I hurt them with my teeth.*

It is difficult to see how this pathos could be better rendered. It helps explain the very different decisions I've earlier described of Yehuda HaLevi who, having come to Granada as a young poet, encouraged by Moshe ibn Ezra, left and made a place for himself as a physician in Christian

Toledo; and who then, trapped between Muslim and Christian violence, cultivated a newly revived Hebrew idiom and set out to return to the biblical land of Israel, then ruled by Crusaders, a journey that would have seemed inconceivable to most Jews at the time. After a long sojourn in Alexandria, he apparently died on a ship bound from Alexandria to Acre.

Cole may undervalue some of the secular poetry of HaLevi, but he appreciates the quiet eloquence in the seeker after Zion. Perhaps the best of Cole's own voice breaks through in his wonderful version of HaLevi's meditation on time and friendship, dedicated to Moshe Ibn Ezra. I quote only the opening of the poem of sixty-eight lines:

*We've known you, parting, ever since we were young,  
and the river of weeping that runs between us is ancient.  
What good would it do to fight against blameless Fortune,  
or quarrel with days, when they have done no wrong?  
The heavens' spheres race along fixed courses,  
and nothing on high ever departs from its path.  
Could this be news—when nothing new comes into  
a world whose laws are drawn by the hand of God?*

Here again is Cole's rendition of the most famous poem of the Hebrew Renaissance, HaLevi's desperately dignified "My Heart Is in the East":

*My heart is in the East—  
and I am at the edge of the West.  
How can I possibly taste what I eat?  
how could it please me?  
How can I keep my promise  
or ever fulfill my vow,  
when Zion is held by Edom  
and I am bound by Arabia's chains?  
I'd gladly leave behind me  
all the pleasures of Spain—  
if only I might see  
the dust and ruins of your Shrine.*

This is the classical, Zionistic awakening from the *Dream of the Poem*— the dream that cultural tolerance could hold off the violent monotheism of Islam and the murderousness of Christian polytheism (to tell a little truth). In his great prose dialogue, the *Kuzari*, written in an ironic Arabic, HaLevi made a classic, permanent defense of Judaism against its demographically overwhelming rivals, Islam and Christianity. He also, with fierce irony, rejects the Arabic culture of his fellow poets and scholars. Heroic, tense, more relevant today than ever, the *Kuzari* seems to me the great book of the Hebrew Renaissance of Spain, which it totally repudiates as an immoral error.

6.

Part Two of *The Dream of the Poem*, which chronicles the long anguish of the Jews of Christian Spain, features three great (and troubling) poets: Avraham Ibn Ezra (no relation to Moshe), the scabrous Yehuda Alharazi (a kind of Thersites figure), and finally Todros Abulafia, previously all but unknown to me, and virtually dismissed by T. Carmi in his important *Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (1981) as "an epigone of the Andalusian school." Cole rehabilitates Todros Abulafia, whose personal intensity and directness is without parallel in his Spanish Hebrew

precursors.

Avraham Ibn Ezra, the first of the Silver Age poets of Hebrew Spain, was still resident in Andalusia and Toledo until he was fifty or so. After that, for more than a quarter-century, he was a wanderer: in Rome, Provence, North Africa, France, and England. A highly original biblical exegete, he wrote discursive books on diverse subjects. As a Hebrew poet, he was—when writing on secular subjects—comedic and ironic, toward the self as toward others. I find a Chaucerian touch in him, some two centuries before Chaucer.

Cole translates powerfully what may be Avraham Ibn Ezra's most famous poem, the harrowing "Lament for Andalusian Jewry." Here, though, I will quote the refreshingly ironic "A Cloak":

*I have a cloak that's a lot like a sieve  
for sifting wheat and barley:  
at night I stretch it taut like a tent,  
and light from the stars shines on me.  
Through it I see the crescent moon,  
Orion and the Pleiades.  
I weary, though, of counting its holes,  
which look like a saw's sharp teeth,  
and dreaming they might be mended with thread  
drawn back and forth's no use.  
If a fly lands there with force like a fool,  
at once it regrets what it's done:  
Replace it, Lord, with a mantle of glory—  
and one that's properly sewn.*

This might be Chaucer complaining to his empty purse, but Chaucer was not a displaced poet, as Avraham Ibn Ezra was. More flamboyant is Yehuda Alharizi, whose startling *Book of Tahkemoni* can be read in the fine English translation of David Segal (2001). It is a maqaama, a picaresque narrative in rhymed prose with interspersed poems, and Alharizi's poem in this Arabic genre produces an outrageous masterpiece, satirizing with desperate glee the Jewish communities he visited in the Near East, Palestine included. Written in rivalry with the Arab master al-Hariri's picaresque stories, *The Book of Tahkemoni* hilariously sustains rereading. Cole confines himself to giving us a large group of Alharizi's frequently inserted lyrics. One of the best of these is titled by Cole "Palindrome for a Patron; Or, Caution: This Door Swings Both Ways":

*Master, yours is righteousness. No evil  
do you grasp. All Mercy. Yours are morals  
empty of obloquies. This God did—for,  
truthfully, you are joy without dishonor.*

\*

*Dishonor without joy are you, truthfully.  
For did God this—obloquies of empty  
morals are yours. Mercy! All grasp  
you do evil. No righteousness is yours, Master.*

The Spanish Hebrew poets, particularly in their long Christian twilight, needed to depend upon patrons, with all the immemorial ambivalences such relationships involve. The freebooter Alharizi is a poet who flowers in his own ambivalences, rather like Baudelaire in that respect, or like "the Yiddish Baudelaire," Moshe Leib Halpern, the best Jewish poet ever to write in these United States.

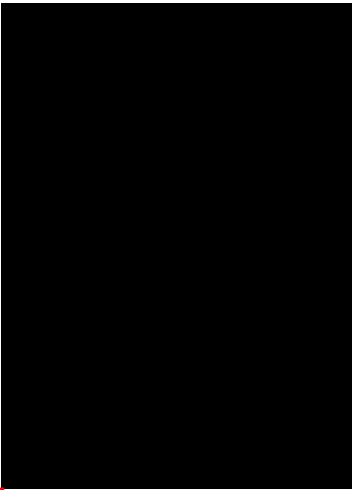
The best of Peter Cole's Big Seven, Todros Abulafia, is all but new to me. A thirteenth-century Jew in Christian Toledo, Todros initially flourished at the court of Alfonso the Wise, who developed a late piety, with its usual imposition of heavy taxes on his Jewish subjects. A spell in prison (with most of the other Jews of Toledo) somewhat diminished Todros's flamboyant persona, but he retained his curious trust in Yahweh. Though I have remarked this in other contexts, it must be the ultimate Jewish irony (if not Jewish joke) that Yahweh, least trustworthy of deities, demands that the Jews trust in their Covenant with him.

Cole terms Todros the "liveliest" of the Christian Age Spanish Hebrew poets. The scamp certainly was resilient, and received court patronage from Sancho IV of Castile/Toledo, the son of the wise Alfonso, but Sancho died in 1295, and Todros simply vanished from Jewish history. Cole happily resurrects him, charmed by his ironic character. Who could resist my particular favorite among Peter Cole's translations of Todros?

*There's nothing wrong in wanting a woman,  
and loving girls is hardly a sin—  
but whether or not they're pretty or pure,  
Arabia's daughters are what you should look for.  
Stay far away from the Spanish Christians,  
although they're fair and bright as the sun,  
for they'll provide neither comfort nor ease,  
even with shawls and silken sleeves:  
their dresses are always covered with mud,  
as their hems are dragged through dung and crud.  
Their minds are empty from heartless whoring—  
when it comes to seduction, they know not a thing.  
But the Arab woman's grace is her glory,  
ravishing spirits, banishing worry.  
And whether or not she's wearing her clothes,  
she looks as though she's decked out in gold.  
She'll give you pleasure when the day arrives,  
for in lewdness's ways and desire she's wise,  
her legs gripped tightly around your head,  
crying out Lord!!—and raising the dead.  
The lover who opts for the Christian feast  
is just like a man who'd lie with a beast.*

Jewish women are omitted, though the rakehell Todros remained a more-or-less faithful Jew. Cole commends Todros for "freshness and candor," and rightly sees in him a final cheerfulness, against the odds, as Spanish Jewish culture began its two-century decline from Sancho IV to Ferdinand and Isabella.

Peter Cole's *The Dream of the Poem* is much more than a distinguished anthology of the Hebrew poetry of Spain. Its eloquent introduction and



highly informative brief biographies of each poet are surpassed by the more than two hundred pages of notes packed with surmises and insights that transcend his invariably relevant guides to meaning of the many hundreds of poems by more than fifty poets. Any reader who wonders, as I have throughout my life, what are the cultural prospects for American Jewry, will find an immense store of analogues in Cole's superb book.

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