

Covenant

From Zliten to Zetan: The Journey of a Libyan Jewish Community and a Tale of Lag B'Omer

By Judith Roumani*

Abstract: The author and her spouse Jacques Roumani make a Lag B'Omer pilgrimage to Zetan, a village founded by Libyan Jewish refugees now in Israel, and find a community with its roots in Libya but now integrating an Israeli component into its celebration of an ancient holiday.

One Thursday evening in May, on the spur of the moment we took a train from Netanya via Tel Aviv to Lod (the town, not the airport, which now has the grander name of Ben Gurion, but which used to be named after the nearest town, Lod, just east of Tel Aviv). Being what was obviously once an important railway junction where one could change for Jerusalem or for the south, Lod has an enormous train station. The line has recently been reopened for passengers to Beer Sheva but, in Turkish or Mandate times the line used to go as far south as Cairo and as far north as Beirut. The line to Jerusalem was built by a French company but originally promoted by Yosef Navon, member of a well known Jerusalem Sephardic family, the builder's most famous descendent being Izhak Navon, former president of Israel. The railways of Israel were an unused alternative for many years, but recently new suburban lines have and are being added and the system is picking up steam as a useful alternative to the clogged highways.

Arriving in Lod station, we traversed tunnels under the many tracks and emerged on the street in Lod. It looked like a typical Israeli *shuk* that had closed for the evening. We found a taxi, but the driver was reluctant to take us to our destination and tried to get another one to take us. "You'll have to walk," he said, "I can't drive in." Our destination was Zetan, a moshav or collective farming village

outside Lod, settled by Jews from Libya in the 1950s and renowned for its synagogue and celebration of Lag B'Omer, the Hilloula or commemoration of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai. This rabbi, who lived in the time of the Romans and because of persecution hid for many years in a cave in Meron in the north of Israel, is the reputed author of the *Zohar*, one of the most important texts of Kabbala. For fourteen years, he ate the fruit of a carob tree growing in the cave and drank the waters of a clear spring, a diet designed to produce kabbalistic thought.

"We'll pay you extra if you take us all the way there," said Jacques to the Arab taxi driver. He set off, bumping along the uneven lanes of Lod, which are lined with low white walls and corrugated tin fences with small houses hidden behind, an old Arab/Bedouin town whose population is still twenty percent Arab. In the daytime, you can see sheep, goats and camels by the train tracks, a sign of the numbers of Bedouin who migrated there from the south, starting in the 1950s, in search of pasture. This was nighttime, so we only glimpsed vague shapes; soon there were no houses behind the walls, and it seemed we were passing between two cemeteries. As my teenage son would say, "Sketchy." Then some fields and finally an industrial area. Suddenly, we came to a traffic light with cars honking, a police barrier and policemen shouting and waving signal torches. The taxi driver bravely plunged into the thick

of it, declaring that he needed to enter the moshav because he had a passenger who couldn't walk. The implication was that the passenger would be cured if he could only get to the synagogue. The policeman took the driver's identity card from him. "*Tireh ma she asitali*—Look what you did to me!" he told us. But he entered the narrow road to the moshav and in about a kilometer deposited us in a crowded area of what looked like a slightly scruffy suburb. Jacques emptied his pockets of all his change in gratitude, and the driver left, apparently happy. When we returned to the traffic light on the way home, he was no longer there, so he must have got his identity card back.

People had come from all over Israel to visit the imposing synagogue, a sight for sore eyes in this suburban sprawl. It is not very old, but is a replica of one that had existed in Libya in this shape since 1912 and as an institution for eight hundred years, probably the oldest continuously functioning synagogue in Libya. As to be expected in North Africa, many miracles are associated with it and with the reputation of the rabbi who founded it. The synagogue in Zetan stands back from a side road in the moshav and is surrounded by flat, sandy areas where the crowds mill around. The one in Libya also stood alone in the middle of an open space. For Lag B'Omer in Israel, there were hundreds of people, a market or fair going on, a concert with singers and loudspeakers, the smell of bonfires and barbecue in the air. We threaded our way through the crowd of Libyan Jews and others. The Libyans had that solid look that one doesn't associate with kabbala enthusiasts, and though the men wore kippot, the women were mostly dressed in secular styles such as jeans, together with headscarves. It was even more crowded inside the synagogue, where there were few seats, but more open space. Perhaps they take the seats out for the occasion. On the women's side, the women were going up the steps to the Ark (the space was divided along the middle and up the steps by a *mehitza*, so men and women were separate) to kiss the Torah scrolls and make a private prayer, and

there was another small crowd lighting candles on the side. Some were reading prayers and *Tehillim* (Psalms). Jacques later told me that one does not usually read *Tehillim* in the evening, but nowadays, people read whatever they like. Our time was short, just enough to admire the harmonious arches outlined with dark maroon paint and try to absorb the atmosphere of reverence. Though not outwardly devout in their dress, the women were obviously very sincere about the importance of their visit there.

Outside, they were handing out squares of a Libyan festive cake called *pan di Spagna*, the recipe for this very rich sponge cake perhaps brought by Sephardim from Spain to Italy and Libya. The stall keepers were selling books and compact disks, or Libyan cooking utensils, a concert blared, barbecues smoked. No doubt somewhere unseen in the throng there were scholars reading from the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic texts, and singing the hymn to Bar Yohai composed by Shimon Lavi, a Spanish rabbi who in the sixteenth century fled to Morocco then, on his way to Jerusalem, stopped in Tripoli to raise the Jewish observance of Libyan Jews.¹

We couldn't look for them, as we had to get the last train back home. A young couple gave us a ride to the traffic light, saying the crowds were thinner than last year; the festivities which had been going on all day were supposed to be winding down, but the policemen were still busy waving their torches and shouting, and the cars were still trying in vain to get in as we went out. We managed to pick up another taxi, and on the way back past the low walls and corrugated tin, we noticed some bonfires burning by the side of the road, flashes in the darkness. Then we saw blue and white flags, and apartment buildings, a Jewish neighborhood, and finally we were back at the closed market outside the station. Our Arab driver laughed as Jacques found that his wallet was stuck inside his back pocket and he couldn't get it out. Finally we paid and rushed inside the station, where we found we had lost one of our return tickets. The ticket lady

waved us through the turnstile as there were only three minutes to go, we ran for the wrong train, and she signaled us in the direction of Platform Four. We ran again: on Platform Four there were about a dozen mostly young families waiting for the last train to Tel Aviv. Suddenly the train pulled into another platform altogether, and everyone rushed down a flight of steps, through a tunnel and up another flight, to catch it. We came puffing behind and a young man leaned against the train door to keep it open until we got on. We had made the Tel Aviv train!

We got back home to Netanya about midnight, to find four or five bonfires burning on the empty lot outside our building, and tried to sleep to the sound of the neighborhood kids excitedly fueling the bonfires all night. In the morning the acrid smell greeted us as we saw the last children leaving the embers on the empty lot at about six-thirty.

From Zliten to Zetan: even the name has changed. What did Zliten mean to Jews in Libya? The synagogue was started as a one-room affair about 950 years ago, by Rabbi Sha'if and his wife, Souisa. It was known as *slat abu-Sha'if*. Or, according to other sources, it was started by an old woman of the same name who provided a room for prayer. In the time of the Sublime Porte, the Ottoman Empire, the synagogue was enlarged and became a place of pilgrimage and a center for study of the *Zohar*. It became the most revered synagogue in Libya. It obviously provoked the envy of local Muslims. The synagogue was burned down in 1868, rebuilt in 1870 by the pasha of Tripoli by order of the Ottoman Sultan, had another near escape from arson, and again burned down this time due to an errant candle in 1912. Shortly after the occupation of Libya by the Italians, it was rebuilt in its final form, the replica of which we see in Zetan.² A synagogue in Benghazi, Libya, where my husband always prayed as a child, was built according to the same inspired design, a wide building with tall, generous arches all around the interior. In such a space, though simple, the mind and spirit could soar.

Libyan Jews were one of the Sephardic communities that preserved study of the *Zohar* through the ages. Whether it was written by Shimon Bar Yohai in Roman times, as tradition tells us, or by Moses de Leon in medieval Spain, it embodied the aspirations and religious emotion of many generations of this community. The North African Sephardim, unlike the Western Sephardim, were less affected by the tragic fiasco of Shabtai Zvi, and therefore never gave up their loyalty to Kabbala, even when their knowledge was by rote. The traditions were passed down from generation to generation, surviving into a modern age of skepticism. So the Libyan Jewish refugees who became farmers outside Lod built their replica of the synagogue of Zliten and named their village Zetan, a place name easier on the Israeli tongue and ear.

Though the last Jews, except for a few isolated individuals, were forced out of Libya in 1967, the synagogue they left behind in Zliten stood intact until the 1980s, perhaps because the local Muslims had some measure of awe and reverence for the traditions associated with it. Then, as part of Qaddafi's modernization program, or in an attempt to obliterate signs of the millennial Jewish life of Libya, the synagogue was demolished and replaced by an apartment block. Though Jews had lived in Libya from the time of the destruction of the First Temple, long before the arrival of Arabs and Muslims in Libya, almost all vestiges of Jewish life there have been destroyed by the government. We can be sure, though, that some memories of their former neighbors still survive among Libyan Arabs. Recent tentative contacts between former Libyan Jews and the Libyan government with a view to preserving some vestige of the Jewish cultural heritage have not been fruitful.³

As young and old flock to Zetan, one hopes that form will not replace content, that Libyan Jews and others will preserve these unique and precious traditions, brought from Libya, perhaps also from Spain, and before that from ancient Israel, as a way of coping with modern

life and as a talisman or shield to protect and carry their identity into the future.

About the Author

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NOTES

¹ The hymn, or *piyut*, “Bar Yochai” is to this day sung every Shabbat by Libyan Jews. A translation can be found at <http://www.ou.org/chagim/lagbaomer/song.htm>. Another annotated translation by Avraham Sutton is at http://www.kabbalaonline.org/Holydays/omer/Bar_Yochai_Song.asp.

² Pedatzur Ben-Attia, “Synagogues and Holy Sites,” in Haim Sadun (ed.), *Luv* [Libya] (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, n.d.), pp. 209-223; Mordechai Hakohen, *The Book of Mordechai: A Study of the Jews of Libya* ed. & trans. Harvey E. Goldberg (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), pp. 156-59. Hakohen was an enlightened autodidact, a member of the rabbinical court of Tripoli, and the most knowledgeable early twentieth century historian of Jewish life in Libya; his Hebrew manuscript, a compendium of customs and history entitled *Higgid Mordekhai* was enlarged and expanded from the early 1900s to the 1920s. It was partially published in colonial times in Italian and French. See also on Hakohen, Harvey Goldberg, “The *Maskil* and the *Mequbbal*: Mordecai Ha-Cohen and the Grave of Rabbi Shim’on Lavi in Tripoli,” in Goldberg (ed.), *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era* (New York: JTS, 1996), pp. 168-80.

³ For example, the recent experience of David Gerbi, a Jew from Libya who had rescued his elderly aunt, the last Jew in Libya, in 2002, and taken her to her family. As a psychotherapist, he memorialized this healing experience in a book and play based on it, *Costruttori di pace/ Making Peace with Gaddafi* (Rome: Edizioni Appunti di Viaggio,

2003). He returned in late 2007 with funds for the preservation of Libyan Jewish religious sites but was relieved of the funds and personal effects and summarily expelled from the country by the authorities. See Etta Prince-Gibson, “Wanting to go Home Again,” *Jerusalem Report*, April 28, 2008.