



IFR NEWS Av/Elul 5782



Hebrew Braille Sefer Torah By IFR Member Rabbi Lenny Sarko

Six years ago I entered the realm of the visually impaired. This happened when bleeding began in my eyes. The doctors were able to arrest it after a few months of treatments but the damage caused by the bleeding was permanent. I was told that if the bleeding returned I might go totally blind. As a rabbi, reading is crucial to my job. I did not want to lose being able to read. This led me beginning to learn English braille. As those studies continued, I found that Hebrew braille also existed. I began on a course of study for that.

Rabbis tend to ask questions. I wondered if a Hebrew braille Torah scroll existed. Although there were braille Torah books, I could not find a sefer Torah – the scroll used for congregational readings. There were none in the United States; there were none in Europe; there were none in Israel.

Jewish blind people and those with visual impairments have not been given the opportunity to participate as a reader in a Sefer Torah congregational service. This had been the case for millennia. Although the statement would seem self-evident, the modern invention of Hebrew braille has placed a new context on this topic. Could a Hebrew braille sefer Torah be created?

The majority of the customs for the creation of a written sefer Torah were promulgated in the eighth century in the text Masekhet Soferim. Braille did not yet exist. Judaism has always adapted the application of its precepts based on context. I embarked on a goal to see if such a scroll could be created and also wanted to define an avenue for the greatest number of blind and visually impaired Jews to participate in their community Torah reading.

How many people could this affect? There are over 400,000 blind and visually impaired Jews in the United States. Although it is difficult to know how many would want to read in a congregational service, even a small percentage is a significant number. **continued on next page**

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IFR Mission Statement

The IFR is a professional organization of rabbis united by a commitment to Jewish tradition and a desire to facilitate the Jewish spiritual growth and life cycle needs of all.

The IFR provides a progressive, pluralistic forum, linking member rabbis in a spirit of friendship and a sense of community.

The IFR provides support for members in their professional endeavors and offers continuing education.

The IFR encourages professional relationships with rabbis and other rabbinic organizations.

The scrolls are in Hebrew. This means that such an object would also be relevant for any blind or visually impaired Jew anywhere in the world.

There are any number of ancillary positives that come from this kind of participation. I have seen congregations find great joy and enthusiasm in watching a blind or visually impaired person participate in such a way. It becomes a great boon to the synagogue as a whole.

The approach to making a Hebrew braille scroll uses much of the same methodology for creation of a written scroll. I use the same parchment, the same sewing material, the same Torah rollers. Many people thought that the dots would be destroyed because of the rolling. It turns out that parchment is both tough and durable. The dots hold up quite well. Braille books tend to be significantly larger than text books. A normal Torah scroll contains roughly 248 columns. It turns out we can create a braille scroll using 239 columns. A text scroll uses 42 lines per column; a Hebrew braille column uses 42 lines per column. A text scroll uses roughly 40 characters per line; a braille scroll uses 40 characters per line. It turns out the the braille scroll is no smaller or larger than a text scroll. There are some differences. Hebrew text is read right to left; Hebrew braille left to right. The written Torah is justified on both the right and left columns; the braille scroll only on the left. Yet the braille scroll can maintain the unique characteristics of the written scroll in spacing and other unique features. Perhaps the biggest issue was the letters of the scroll had to be hand made without error. Manual creation of braille is done with a slate and stylus.

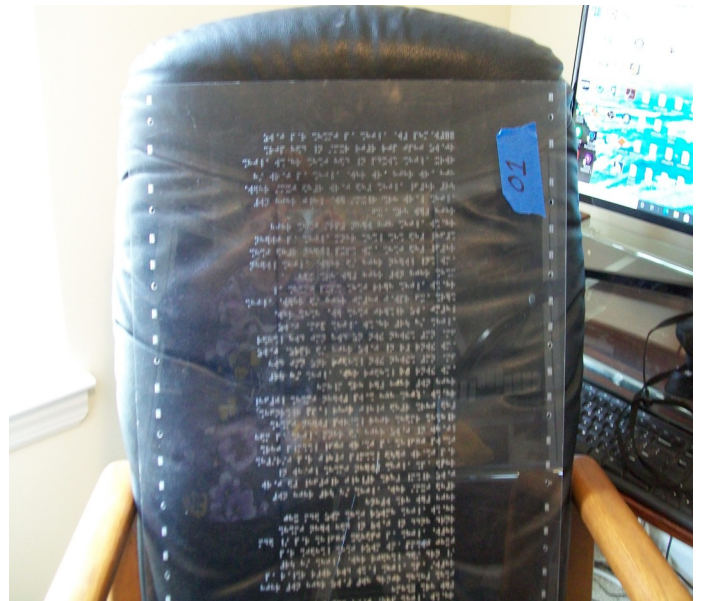
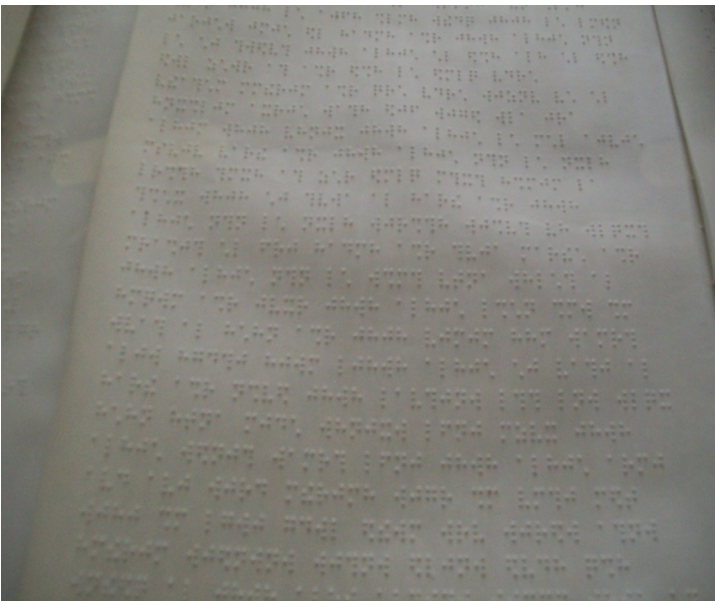
Yet to do so without errors for the number of words and letters that had to be done was a difficult

problem. It took a few years but this was overcome by creating a unique slate for each column, predilled for each letter on that column.

The entire Five Books of Moses in Hebrew braille not only could be done, but was done. Blind and visually impaired Jews are geographically widely dispersed. To deal with this we centralize scroll storage. Blind/visually impaired congregants and their congregations can request a scroll for a specific Shabbat. The scroll is mailed to them the previous week and sent back the week thereafter. To augment this application, when the initial reservation is accepted, a package is sent to that congregation and/or reader with a set of braille verses on braille paper, of that biblical portion, so that the reader can practice what they will be doing on the designated Shabbat. In this way costs can be minimized and using these scrolls is affordable. Many blind and visually impaired Jews may not know how to read Hebrew braille. I created a remote learning course to allow a person to learn to read from the Torah. A number of workbooks are sent, with a set in text form, so a helper can assist in the learning. The helper does not need to know Hebrew or braille. In this way the individual can go at whatever pace they wish to learn to read Hebrew braille enough to be able to read from the scrolls. For those with sight, you are welcome to go to our website to view pictures of the scrolls, www.devarim.org.

If anyone would like to talk about this project or wish to learn enough to be able to use a scroll at their own congregation, please do not hesitate to contact me. The contact information can also be found at the website.

Rabbi Lenny Sarko



IFR Schmooze and NEWS

מזל טוב

Mazal Tov to IFR Member Rabbi Lenny and Rebitzen Sarko whose son Rabbi Michael Sarko recently received rabbinic smicha. Rabbi Michael's rabbinic focus is chaplaincy, he has been hired by a hospital in Seattle in this position. Rabbi Michael Sarko is married to Kara, they have one son named Cameron and one baby on the way.



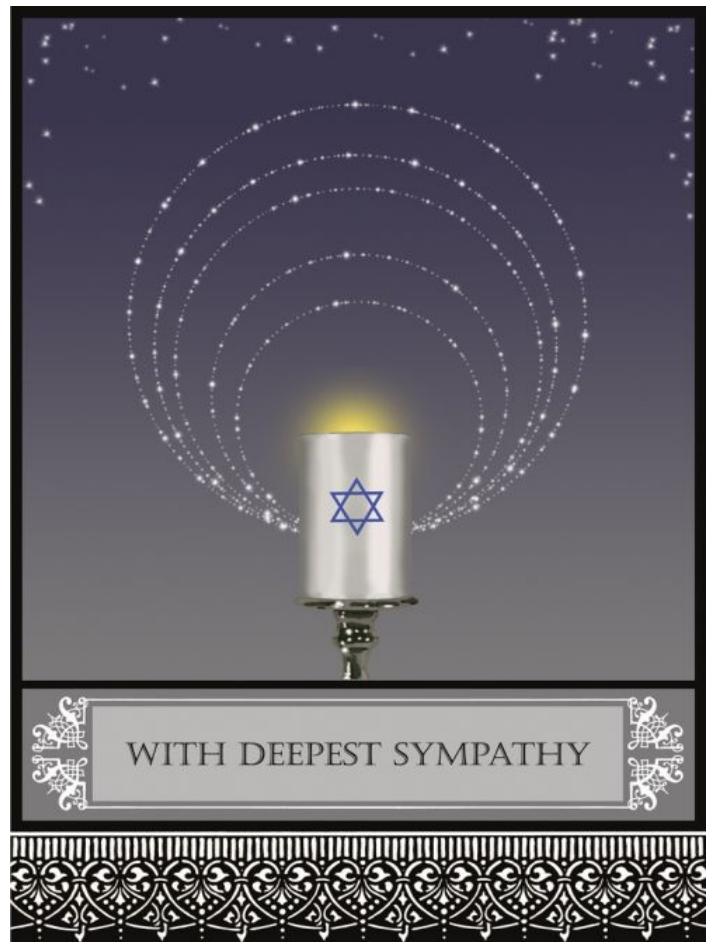
Michael Ben Tamar

Roberta Wojcik

Moshe Ben Etel

Ari Ben Shoshanna

The IFR Lapel Pin was minted in 2020 in solid brass with an antique brass finish and black enamel. The pin is one inch across, and is available for IFR Members \$55.00 USD ships free in the continental USA, shipping rates are applied outside of the USA.



Our condolences to IFR Member Rabbi Galit Shirah Levy-Slater and family on the passing of her beloved husband Robert M. Slater / Shiron Ben Avraham v'Sarah z"l on March 6, 2022/3 Adar II, 5782. If you would like to contact Rabbi Galit directly please email her at:

duets@icloud.com





IFR NEWS Av/Elul 5782



The Origins of Chodesh AV

Av (Hebrew: אָב; Modern: 'Av, Tiberian: 'Āḇ; from Akkadian 'Abū "father") is the eleventh month of the civil year and the fifth month of the ecclesiastical year on the Hebrew calendar. The name comes from Araḇ Abu, "month of Abu", from the Babylonian calendar. The name Ab (Arabic: أب) also appears in the Arabic language for the month of August in the Levant (see Arabic names of calendar months). The name first appears in Second Temple literature, such as Megillat Taanit.⁽³⁾ It is one of several months which are not explicitly named in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh). It is a month of 30 days. Av usually occurs in July–August on the Gregorian calendar.

The Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 29a, states that "when we enter (the month of) Av, our joy is diminished". This is because the darkest events in Jewish history occurred during the first week and a half of this month, particularly the Nine Days which culminate in Tisha B'Av, the 9th of Av. However, there is a minor and largely unknown holiday during the full moon of the month called Tu B'Av which was, in ancient times, one of the happiest days of the year. The month is also sometimes referred to as Menachem Av (Av of Comfort or Comforter of Father(s) but most only use this title in the sanctification of the month recited on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh and following Tisha B'Av.

Important dates in the month of AV

Av 9 – Tisha B'Av

Av 15 – Tu B'Av

Av in Jewish history

1 Av (circa 1273 BCE) – Death of high priest Aaron

1 Av (513 BCE) – Ezra and his followers arrive in Israel

5 Av (1572 CE) – Hillula of the Arizal

7 Av (586 BCE) – First Temple invaded by King Nebuchadnezzar

7 Av (67 CE) – Civil war breaks out in besieged Jerusalem; one group set fire to the city's food stores, which is said to have quickened starvation

7 Av (1492 CE) – Jews of Spain expelled by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

9 Av (586 BCE and 70 CE) – Holy Temples destroyed by the Babylonians and Romans respectively.

9 Av (133 CE) – Fall of Betar to the Romans, ending Bar Kochba's rebellion.

9 Av (1290 CE) – Jews are expelled from England by King Edward I and not permitted to legally return for 350 years.

10 Av (70 CE) – The Holy Temple, set on fire the previous day, finishes burning.

12 Av (1263) – Disputation of Barcelona between Nachmanides and Pablo Christiani.

15 Av (148 CE) – Betar dead buried, 15 years after the fall of the fortress.

15 Av – The Day of the Breaking of the Ax – when the Holy Temple existed, the cutting of firewood for the altar was completed on this date every year. The event was celebrated by feasting, rejoicing, and the ceremonial breaking of the axes

17 Av (1929) – 67 Jews are killed in the Hebron Massacre.

24 Av (circa 100 BCE) – A Hasmonean holiday commemorates the reinstatement of Jewish civil law in place of Hellenist secular law on this day.



IFR NEWS Av /Elul 5782



The origins of Elul as a month of special Divine grace and mercy go back to the time of Moses, in the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE)—the first year after the Jewish people went out of Egypt.

Seven weeks after the exodus, the people of Israel received the Torah at Mount Sinai and entered into an eternal covenant with G-d as His chosen people. But just 40 days later, while Moses was still up on the mountain, they violated their special relationship with G-d by worshipping a golden calf.

Upon descending from the mountain and witnessing their transgression, Moses smashed the two stone tablets on which G-d had inscribed the Ten Commandments; he then returned to Mount Sinai for a second 40 days to plead with G-d on Israel's behalf.

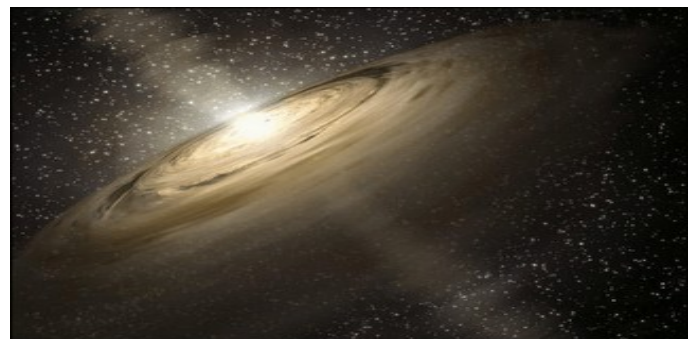
On the early morning of the 1st of Elul, Moses once again ascended Mount Sinai, taking with him the stone tablets he had hewn, by divine command, for G-d to re-inscribe the Ten Commandments.

On the mountain, G-d allowed Moses to "see My back, but not My face" (which Maimonides interprets as a perception of G-d's reality but not His essence) – the closest any human being ever came to knowing G-d – and taught him the secret of His "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" (Exodus 33:18-34:8).

For the third time, Moses remained on the mountain for 40 days, from the 1st of Elul until the 10th of Tishrei (Yom Kippur), during which time He obtained G-d's whole-hearted forgiveness and reconciliation with the people of Israel. Ever since, the month of Elul serves as the "month of Divine mercy and forgiveness."

Special Customs for 25th of Elul : The 25th day of Elul commemorates the first of the six days of creation. Adam and Hava were created on the sixth day of creation, Rosh Hashanah, and thus the first day was 25 Elul. On this day, God brought a special "light of kindness" into existence, and this is thus a very auspicious and significant occasion. It is therefore proper to treat this day with special sanctity.

Rav Benayahu Shemuely (contemporary) outlines several specific customs that should be observed on this day (listen to audio recording for precise citation). He writes that before sundown on the evening before 25 Elul, one should immerse in a Mikveh.





He /She should first immerse for the purpose of eliminating the Ru'ah Ra'a (evil spirit), and then a second time as a Tikun (rectification) for the sin of anger. Thereafter, one should immerse five times corresponding to the five times the word "Or" ("light") is mentioned in the story of creation, thereby bringing upon oneself the special "light" of Hesed that abounds on this special day.

One should be especially careful to avoid anger throughout the night and day of 25 Elul, and also to abstain from idle chatter. It is improper to fast on 25 Elul; to the contrary, one should eat a meal with bread and meat both at night and during the day, and recite Birkat Ha'mazon after each meal with special intensity. One should also eat sweet treats on this day, as we commemorate the beginning of the world's creation and thus hope to bring sweetness into the new year.

It is proper to give large amounts of charity on 25 Elul, as well. If it falls on Shabbat, as it does this year, one can pledge charity in the synagogue.

The husband or wife should light five special candles on this day corresponding to the five "lights" of kindness that came into existence on the first day of creation. If this day falls on Shabbat, these special candles should be lit before the onset of Shabbat.

If 25 Elul falls on a day when the Torah is read in the synagogue, one should try to receive an Aliya to the Torah

Each day from 25 Elul through Rosh Hashanah, one should read the verses in the Torah that speak about that day's creation.

On 25 Elul, one reads the verses that tell of the first day, on 26 Elul one reads about the second day, and so on, such that on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, one reads the verses of the sixth day of creation. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, one reads the verses of "Vayechulu." There are special Bakashot that should be recited before and after each day's reading.

Although the entirety of the month of Elul is an especially auspicious time for repentance and Kedusha, there is unique significance to the final week, when we commemorate the world's creation.

This is a time of special divine kindness, and we must take advantage of this unique opportunity by observing these customs to the best of our ability, and, more generally, enhancing our devotion to Torah and Mitzvot.

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IFR NEWS Av/Elul 5782

Labor Day - Rosh Hashanah and Thanksgiving - Chanukah Enough Already! Can We Bring the Generations Together

With a New Diaspora Calendar?

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello

Long before Covid complicated Jewish observance, there were ominous signs that participation in synagogue life, especially Holy Day and festival services, was on the decline. Dependent as we Jews are on the Hebrew calendar, rabbis and congregants found themselves at the mercy of the secular Diaspora agenda - so much so that in 2021 we tried to shoehorn a first day Rosh Hashanah celebration into Labor Day and a Chanukah festival three days after Thanksgiving.

So we ask, could it be time to bring the generations together with a new Diaspora calendar? Consider this. Young families who traveled long distances to Thanksgiving dinner at bubbe's house often faced school and work responsibilities in the following week and could not remain for Chanukah. The result? For many families the "I'dor v'dor" experience of sharing the Festival of Lights with the generations was lost.

In recent years some synagogues have confronted the problem head on by adding parallel services and celebrations on weekend days so that a majority of congregants could attend. For example, in 2021 Purim fell on secular February 25 - a Thursday evening. To combat the obvious lack of participation they were sure to face, a number of synagogues offered a Purim observance on February 28, the following Sunday afternoon. From Boston, to Atlanta to Shreveport, Louisiana, synagogues sidestepped the Hebrew calendar and opted instead for a calendar date that made

Diaspora sense.

Emphasizing the crisis facing synagogues post Covid, Jewish Journal editor and author, David Suissa asks, "How Will Synagogues Reinvent Themselves? (Hint: It Won't Be with Zoom)" (11/4/21). Suissa says, "The vast majority of American synagogues are looking at an uncertain future ... In short, synagogues will improve their odds of bringing back the crowds if they open up to new ideas and new thinking." One idea might be a Diaspora Calendar that would create the opportunity for more Jews to participate consistently in synagogue life. That means that for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and all the Jewish holidays, congregants would have the option to attend a lay led service on the Hebrew date, or a Diaspora service that would fall on the same day or the same weekend every year.

Here's how it works. Rosh Hashanah can occur any time between September 5 and October 5, which accounts for our annual musings, "The Holy Days are late (or early) this year."

But what if the Holy Days like Rosh Hashanah were consistent? What would it mean to Jewish families if they knew that September 17 is always Rosh Hashanah while Kol Nidre is always September 25 and Yom Kippur is always September 26? Or what if Erev Rosh Hashanah always fell on the third Friday of September so that the two day New Year observance as well as Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur consistently occurred on the weekend?



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How was your Chanukah this past year? Was the transition from turkey to latkes a smooth one? For many Jewish families the 2021 Chanukah celebration was a challenge, not only because it fell so close to Thanksgiving, but because both the first night and the eighth night, when traditional Chanukah celebrations often are held, were also school and work nights. Not to mention that the entire eight day celebration was especially challenging for families that had to navigate between Jewish tradition and secular society. But what if Chanukah were consistent as well, occurring at a time when secular society is celebrating a national holiday?

Given that Chanukah can begin as early as late November or as late as early January, securing the holiday at a time consistent with school vacations and reduced work schedules might offer families the opportunity every year to bring children, parents and grandparents together. If Chanukah fell annually from December 21 through December 28 there would be time for our families to hear the stories, to kindle the light and to give a beautiful Jewish event the "kavanah," (attention) that it deserves while rekindling traditions that form the bedrock of a vibrant Jewish life.

A radical idea? Not really, especially when we consider what some historians believe actually happened during the time of the Maccabees, when Jews rescheduled an important Jewish holi-

day to a more convenient time.

In 2005 Rabbi Mark Glickman penned an article in the Seattle Times that posed the question, "Why is Hanukkah eight days long?" Rabbi Glickman explains that the answer is found in the observance of another Jewish holiday, the festival of Sukkot. The rabbi writes that "Sukkot is an eight-day celebration that usually occurs in September or October, when Jews were supposed to have made pilgrimages to the Temple to offer sacrifices to God."

However, because the Temple was under siege, the Jews could not observe Sukkot. Approximately two months later, after the Temple was restored, the elders of the community decreed that Sukkot would be celebrated at a different time. The Jews would adjust their festival dates to observe the eight days of Sukkot in December, in the Hebrew month of Kislev. So significant was this change that the holiday that year was known as Sukkot B'kislev, or December Sukkot!

Could it be that the Covid pandemic brought about a crisis in Judaism as monumental as the Temple under siege? David Souissa thinks so. He writes, "When the Second Temple was destroyed nearly 2,000 years ago, our religion went through another earthquake ... (but) we overcame that destruction by being creative, resourceful and resilient. ... We survived by staying connected, to our traditions and to one another."

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★ HEBREW CALENDAR Elul 5779-Tishrei 5780 / GREGORIAN CALENDAR 2020

September 2020 / Elul 5780 - Tishrei 5781		תשרי 5781	חשוון 5781	כסלו 5781	טבת 5781
1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30
31					

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Our person to person connections form the foundation of Jewish life. Our Hebrew calendar, perfect as it is for Israel, is an obstacle in the Diaspora. It is worth considering a Diaspora calendar and, with Sukkot B'kislev as our guide, this time of upheaval could be the right time for a change that would revive synagogue life by meeting the needs of Diaspora Jews.

Photos of IFR Rabbis from past conferences...





Ravenous Ravens

**Rabbi Frank Tamburello's
Jewish Food Column
Featuring Eats and Treats**



YEMENITE VEGETABLE SOUP

Ingredients

- 1 medium celeriac (celery root), cubed (about 3 cups), divided
- 4-5 medium carrots, sliced (about 2 cups)
- 1 1/2 cups cubed butternut squash
- 1 medium onion, cut into eight pieces (about 1 cup)
- 1 medium parsnip, sliced (about 1 cup)
- 2 medium Yukon gold potatoes, cubed (about 1 cup)
- 3 garlic cloves
- 2 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 4 Tbsp tomato paste
- 2 tsp salt
- 2 tsp turmeric
- 1 tsp cumin
- 1 tsp coriander
- 1/2 tsp ground black pepper
- 10 oz Enoki mushrooms, roots removed

1. Combine half the celery root, the carrots, onions and garlic in the food processor and pulse until chopped very small.
2. Heat olive oil in a large soup pot. Add chopped vegetables and cook over medium high heat for 10-12 minutes, stirring frequently.
3. Add tomato paste, salt, turmeric, cumin, coriander and pepper and continue cooking for 3-4 minutes, stirring frequently.
4. Add 8 cups water, bring to a boil and add the rest of the celery root, butternut squash and the potatoes. Reduce heat and simmer, covered, for 35-40 minutes.
5. Remove from heat. Add Enoki mushrooms and let it sit, covered for 5-10 minutes. Enjoy!



IFR NEWSLETTER TEAM

Rabbi Barbara Aiello

Rabbi Frank Tamburello

shosh / Layout



Ravenous Ravs

Rabbi Frank Tamburello's Jewish Food Column Featuring Eats and Treats



SPAGHETTI AL LIMONE

2-3 tablespoons coarse salt

1 lb. spaghetti

10 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 tablespoon lemon zest

2 tablespoons lemon juice

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

1/3 cup packed fresh basil leaves, chopped

3/4 cup grated parmigiano cheese

6 sprigs fresh basil for garnish

Add coarse salt to 2 gallons rapidly boiling water. Stir in spaghetti and cook until al dente. Drain.

Meanwhile, melt butter in large sauté pan. Add zest, juice, salt and pepper. Heat gently one minute. Toss with spaghetti.

Add basil and parmigiano cheese and toss until spaghetti is evenly coated. Serve in warm pasta bowls and garnish with basil.

Sprinkle with more cheese before serving.



THEO'S CHICKEN SOUP

Theodore Bikel's personal recipe.

Ingredients

5-6 lb. (very good sized) chicken

2 lg. bunches dill, washed

2 lg. bunches parsley, washed

8 or more carrots, peeled and whole

8 or more celery stalks

4 medium sized yellow onions, at least

4 purple and white turnips, at least, peeled and whole.

4-6 parsnips, scraped and whole

1-2 leeks, washed very, very carefully and cut into large pieces Salt and white pepper to taste, but you MUST use SALT.

Water to cover

In a very large soup pot, place chicken in cold water and bring to a boil. Turn the heat to simmer, and add the dill, parsley, carrots, celery, onions, turnips, parsnips, leeks, salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then lower to simmer. Skim from time to time. Cook until the chicken has practically fallen off the bones. (This is not for eating chicken, this is for making intense soup!) Remove from heat and strain soup discarding the vegetables and the chicken (it has served its purpose...and all its significance is now in the broth). Refrigerate overnight and remove fat.

The soup should appear to be gelled and green colored from the dill. So, enjoy!



Ravenous Ravens



**Rabbi Frank Tamburello's
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RUSSIAN BEET SALAD

1 medium sized beet

10-12 pitted prunes

1/2 cup walnuts

2 tablespoons mayonnaise

Boil the beet until tender, approximately 40 minutes. Grate. Put prunes in pan and cover with cold water, cover and bring to a boil.

Remove from heat, let cool and cut into small pieces. Cut walnuts into small pieces or crush them. Combine beets, prunes, and walnuts into a bowl and mix. Add mayonnaise.

Mix again.



TOMATES YENAS DE KESO (Sephardic Stuffed Tomatoes)

8 medium tomatoes, about 2 lbs.

Salt

1/2 - 1 tsp sugar

4 oz. Balkan (or other) feta cheese

4 oz. cottage cheese

2 eggs, slightly beaten

1/4 tsp. nutmeg

1 tsp. dried mint

Pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Oil a baking dish. With a sharp pointed knife, cut a little circle around the stem end of each tomato, creating a lid. With a spoon scoop out the seeds being careful not to bread the outer flesh and skin. Place tomatoes into an oiled baking dish cut side up. Sprinkle lightly with a little salt and sugar. In a bowl, mash the feta cheese with a fork, add the cottage cheese and eggs, nutmeg, mint, and pepper. Mix well. Fill the tomatoes with the cheese mix. Put the lids on and bake for about 30 minutes until the tomatoes are soft. Take care that it does not overcook and fall apart. Serve hot or at room temperature.





Ravenous Ravs

**Rabbi Frank Tamburello's
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BABOVKA (Czech Cake)

1 cup, plus 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
1 1/4 cup sugar
4 eggs
3 teaspoons baking powder
1 1/2 cup flour
1/8 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon vanilla extract (or rum, almond, or lemon)
1/2 cup raisins

Confectioner's sugar for dusting

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour a bundt cake pan. Cream butter and sugar together. Combine flour and baking powder. Beat while gradually adding the eggs alternating with the flour mixture to the butter/sugar mixture. Add salt, extract and raisins and mix well. Place dough in prepared pan and bake 50-60 minutes. Allow to cool and remove from pan. Dust with confectioner's sugar.



ORANGE CREAM CHEESE COOKIES

1/2 cup butter
1/2 cup sugar
1 1/2 oz. cream cheese
1 egg yolk
1 tsp. vanilla extract
1 tablespoon frozen orange juice
Grated rind of one orange
1 1/2 cups sifted flour
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon baking powder

Prepare cookie sheets. Beat the butter and sugar until light and creamy. Beat in the cream cheese and egg yolk. Add the vanilla extract, orange juice and grated rind. Fold in the flour sifted with the salt and baking powder. Chill the dough for one hour. Drop from a teaspoon onto the cookie sheets and bake in preheated 350 degree oven for 10 minutes.





IFR NEWS Av/Elul 5782



Visitors at the Dino Park Experience in Tel Aviv, Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

The (Very) Brief History of Dinosaurs in the Holy Land

A debate is raging over the remains of the ancient reptiles found in Israel. Some researchers want them analyzed and displayed in a museum, others believe that the real museum is nature itself

Moshe Gilad Portion reprinted from Ha'aretz
Aug 18, 2021

Two little girls, not very tall at all, gazed upwards. Above them soared a gigantic furry creature, hairy and brown, 10 meters (about 33 feet) high. It shook its head and opened its mouth wide. Far down his body, his hairy tail wagged. One of the little girls waved and said: "Hi mammoth!" The second added, almost in a whisper: "It's just a dino-

saur." Roars came from hidden speakers. I stepped back with a certain amount of trepidation. The little girls didn't look very upset and moved on to look at the next terrifying creature. The Dino Park Experience that opened last week at Park Hayarkon in Tel Aviv is a cross between "Jurassic Park" and a colorful day care center with an ice cream stand. Park Hayarkon and Nahal Havarim in the northern Negev are the two furthest extremes imaginable in the State of Israel. Nevertheless, they are now the two sides of the Israeli dinosaur story. In both places there is our primeval, uncontrollable attraction to the huge ancient creatures, to the mysterious marine reptiles.

Sites around the world where dinosaur tracks are discovered are constantly in the headlines. Only two months ago, Australian scientists succeeded in identifying a new species of dinosaur, which they say was "the size of a basketball court." At Kamenjak National Park in western Croatia, I once saw 12 tracks of dinosaurs that had walked along the beach 56 million years ago.

Beit Zayit near Jerusalem, is the only place in Israel where dinosaur tracks have been found so far. To enter the area where the tracks are visible, in the center of the moshav, you first have to apply to the secretariat, ask the clerk there for the key, promise her that you'll be right back and then open the lock and stand there gaping in amazement at a rock on which there are about 200

prints of a foot with three claws. An old open-sided shelter covers this courtyard, but rain and problematic conditions have been eroding the invaluable footprints. The feeling here is that the creatures are not getting the respect they deserve.

From Beit Zayit I drive to Jerusalem's Givat Ram neighborhood to meet Prof. Rivka Rabinovich, a paleontologist – a specialist in ancient plant and animal life – whose field of interest is archaeozoology, the study of animal bones found in archaeological and paleontological excavations. She is also the curator of the paleontology collection at the Hebrew University National Natural History Collections. Her laboratory is a candy store dream for fossil-lovers.

At the start of the meeting, she makes our status in the world of dinosaurs clear: "Because of our location and the geological history here, we were under water for a long time. Therefore, we have an abundance of animals that lived during the period of the dinosaurs, but in the sea. There were lots of sea creatures here and fewer land animals that are known to date.

"The only remains of land animals are those tracks you saw at Beit Zayit and their condition is not good. They are getting eroded. I hope they will let us scan them soon to find out more about them.

The research on them was done in the 1960s and the field has changed and developed since then. According to the tracks, it's possible to calculate and know the animal's size and weight of the. Its age is known from the context – from the geology, from the age of the rock. It's always one piece."

The field is not very popular in Israel. "Right. Dinosaurs get a very high rating and attention isn't paid to the sea reptiles but it's important to remember that there were just as many marine rep-

tiles as dinosaurs in the world. Their remains have even been better preserved."

Does the popularization seen at the dinosaur parks annoy you?

"It amuses me. In a few places there are good exhibits and reconstructions but sometimes it's funny. I know very well that it's possible and important to transmit knowledge, especially to children, outside of museums, but we mustn't compromise on the way it looks. We mustn't make this into a horror movie if we are going to teach things the right way – even children will understand it and love it."

What are the important sites in the field in Israel?

"We have lots of sites with interesting findings – Makhtesh Ramon, Mount Sodom, Mount Menuha in the Arava (Desert) and sites beyond the Green Line like Ein Yabrud near Ofra, where there are tremendous treasures in an old quarry. It's a special place with excellent preservation, and in the past many amazing fossils came from there, but today it's difficult if not impossible to do fieldwork there. The biggest potential for discovering interesting findings is in the area of the phosphate mining operations at Oron. I hope we will be able to work together and collaborate with them in the future. There are initial signs of this, and I am optimistic."

The most talked-about site is Nahal Havarim near Sde Boker, where you worked this year.

"Right. It came to us sort of by surprise. There were reports that fossils had been exposed in the streambed during winter floods. When we arrived at the site, we discovered partially exposed vertebrae in the middle of the path.

On the ground, in hard rock in the heart of the streambed. After a lot of consultations with geologists, expert conservators and other professionals

we understood that it was impossible to preserve the findings in situ and we had to take them out. "We obtained all the necessary permits from the Nature and Parks Authority and ultimately a whole team of us worked there for a week in May this year. Using a difficult and complex process, we took out lumps of rock, each of which contains a vertebra or two. We didn't find a jaw at the site. We did find a jaw in a higher bench of rock but I don't think it belongs to the same animal. "The vertebrae are buried in very hard rock. It's necessary to clean them very carefully so as not to lose details linked to attributing the vertebrae to a species. We are still at a very early stage of figuring it out. Things like that take time and at the moment it appears that no one has the patience." *What can be said about it as of now?*



"It can be said that it's a rich area. There were many findings that we left in the field but it must be stressed that it's not of a magnitude that we haven't known before. The fact that was unique was that it was in the middle of a hikers' path. The scientists who worked with me, geologists Dr. Yaron Finzi and Dr. Sarit Ashkenazi-Polybuda of the Dead Sea and Arava Science Center, took samples and did a geological section that will give us the context – how rich or meager the sea was. The microscopic animals will give us a lot of information."

Nature, the real museum

The commotion surrounding the site at Nahal Havarim began right during the excavation. Rabinovitch admits she was surprised by the emotions that were aroused. Paleontology is usually a



calmer field. Ancient marine reptiles are not accustomed to loud arguments.

A number of tour guides, geologists and inhabitants of the region, headed by Ziv Sherzer, the head of instruction at the Sde Boker Field School, wrote a sharply worded letter to Shaul Goldstein, the CEO of the Nature and Parks of Authority, which had approved the excavation. They are angry at the removal of the findings from the site that is precious to them and serves them daily for instruction and hikes.

The signatories make it clear that they have a different view of the considerations that led, according to them, to damage to the natural infrastructure of a streambed that serves a large public for hikes. "What is found in nature should stay in nature – it is the real museum," the letter reads.

Moreover, they question the assertion that the erosion caused by floods and hikers endangered the fossils. In their opinion, the educational value of the findings is greater than the research value. They point a finger at the phosphate deposits in the Oron-Zin Valley, where they say there are endless fossils from the same period that are being pulverized the mining process.

They believe the study of fossils has to focus on those areas. They also demand that the damage caused to the fossil site at Havarim be repaired and that replicas of the fossils that were removed be placed there.

In reply to the letter, the director of the Nature and Parks Authority's Southern Region, Gilad Gabbai, agreed that what is found in nature should be left in nature – unless there is a real danger to its existence. He showed understanding of the importance of science: "It goes without say-

ing that the aspiration to leave the fossils in the field is the first priority," he wrote, "but given the conditions on the ground, a reality was created in which it was not possible to conserve the important findings at their current quality in the field." Gabbai also agreed that it is important to place replicas at the site in the future.

The written response to the letter from Rabinovich and the geologists who worked with her points out the importance of the findings and highlights the gap between the perspectives. According to them, the reality that emerged on the ground showed there was no possibility of conserving the fossils at the site. "In Israel it is rare to find specimens from that animal, as witnessed by the nearly zero information and specimens we have for that animal," they wrote. "In proximity to the vertebrae, jaws and bones were found that will make it possible to identify the species of the animal and the characteristics of its habitat and the environment. "Additional large bones that were found at the site in hard rock and were less exposed to damage were left at the site in the hope that the findings that were taken will provide a full picture of the site and the assortment of fossils there, with the understanding of the value of the fossils for hikers, educators and residents."

Testifying to the frustration of Rabinovich and her colleagues are the following lines: "To our regret the field has won more recognition as a collector's hobby than as a scientific discipline. Many fossils have been removed from their geological context by collectors, hikers and even instructors and people from other professions. Some of these fossils are even on display at various institutions, without having been scientifically published and without any protest having arisen like what we are

experiencing here. In Given that, the existing knowledge in Israel about the living world in the distant past, especially of the vertebrates, is very limited and light years behind other areas of research in geology and relative to the situation in other countries." The closing line of the letter is: "Lack of knowledge is not a protected value of nature."

Sherzer preferred not to be interviewed this article.

"There is no significance to fossils that aren't studied," says Rabinovich, explaining that she hopes that in the future, she will be able to cooperate with the signatories to the letter as well.

Are there examples of similar cases elsewhere in the world?

"In Morocco there is a huge phosphates unit and they managed to have good cooperation. They move mountains. The moment they see findings and preserve them, it's fine. French scientists and Moroccan partners are finding amazing things there. I hope that this will also happen here, that good cooperation with the industries at Zin and Oron will develop. It's an important step."

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Homes in Beit Zayit, near Jerusalem, the only place in Israel where dinosaur tracks have been found so far.

Credit: Emil Salman

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"Additional large bones that were found at the site in hard rock and were less exposed to damage were left at the site in the hope that the findings that were taken will provide a full picture of the site and the assortment of fossils there, with the understanding of the value of the fossils for hikers, educators and residents."



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Shoah Education

**The Vél d'Hiv
Roundup of Jews
Paris, France
July 16 - 17 1942**



It's 80 years since the July 16 -17 1942 Vélodrome d'Hiver (or "Vél d'Hiv") roundup, when French police detained 13,000 Parisian Jews, including 4,000 children, acting on orders from occupying German forces and their French allies in the Vichy Regime. Many were first sent to the Vélodrome d'Hiver stadium, which gave its name to this sinister chapter of French history, before being deported to Auschwitz, never to return. FRANCE 24's Claire Paccalin and Stéphanie Trouillard met with survivors who managed to escape.

On July 16 and 17 of that year, a total of 12,884 Jews – men, women and children – were snatched from their homes in Paris and in neighbouring suburbs. Some were taken directly to an internment camp in Drancy, northeast of the capital. The rest were crammed into the Vélodrome d'Hiver, a stadium located on the banks of the Seine in the 15th *arrondissement* (district) of Paris, which would give its name to this sinister chapter in French history.

To mark the 80th anniversary of this tragic event, FRANCE 24 has gathered the eyewitness accounts of six survivors of the Vél d'Hiv roundup, all of them children at the time. They recall the shock and horror of those days, and the extraordinary circumstances that allowed them to avoid deportation to Nazi death camps.

Each of them presents a cherished object – a family picture, candlesticks, a wallet – invested with memories of their childhood and their loved ones. For the longest time, survivors of the roundup kept quiet about this deeply traumatic event. Eighty years on, they have chosen to speak out and pass on their memories to ensure the lessons of history are not forgotten.



Renée Borycki was born in Paris on July 16, 1936, to parents of Polish origin. Her father Mordka, a hairdresser, arrived in France in 1931, soon followed by his wife Bluma, a seamstress. Their lives were turned upside down in May 1941 when Mordka was instructed to report for a "status check" at a gymnasium in eastern Paris.

It was a trap. Renée's father was arrested on the spot, along with some 3,700 other male foreign Jews, in what would come to be known as the "green ticket roundup".

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He was taken at first to an internment camp in Pithiviers, south of Paris, and later deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. On July 16, 1942, Renée's 6th birthday and the day before her father was deported to the death camps in Poland, she and her mother miraculously escaped the Vél d'Hiv roundup. When police came knocking on their door, Bluma and Renée managed to slip into a neighbour's apartment, before finding refuge with a cousin in a suburb of Paris. They hid there for several days, until a woman whom they barely knew offered them shelter. For the next two and a half years, mother and daughter lived in a storage room at the woman's home, sharing a single food voucher between the three of them. To this day, Renée bears the physical and emotional scars of her childhood as an "*enfant caché*" (a hidden child).

After the war, Renée was among the few *enfants cachés* to experience the joy of seeing a parent return from Auschwitz-Birkenau. She later worked with her father in a clothing workshop, along with her husband. Until his death in 1983, Mordka was a tireless spokesperson for Holocaust victims, working with the association "convoi n°6," named after the convoy that took him to the Nazi camps in Poland. Renée and her son Alexandre have now taken up the baton to preserve his memory and those of the Holocaust's countless other victims.

These are my grandparents' candleholders. It was a custom in Poland: when a young girl got married, she received candlesticks from her parents so that she could light them in turn on Shabbat and remember her family. My mother took them with her on the day of the Vél d'Hiv roundup. How did she do it? I can't say. In any case, that's what she chose to save. During the war, she sold everything to give us food, even her wedding ring. But she kept her candlesticks as a souvenir of her parents and of her native Poland. This is the only link I have today with my grandparents. When I light them for the children, I feel like they are there with us.





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Samuel Bliman was born in Paris on June 15, 1930. His parents, both of them Polish, arrived in France at the end of the 1920s. Izrael worked as a tailor while his wife Chawa ran a small grocery store. When war with Germany broke out in September 1939, Izrael joined Polish forces fighting on France's side. Following the French debacle, he was demobilised and returned to Paris at the end of 1940. Just months later, he too was arrested during the "green ticket roundup". He was sent to the internment camp of Beaune-la-Rolande, south of Paris, where his family last saw him before he was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on June 28, 1942. Just weeks later, at 7 o'clock in the morning of July 16, one of Chawa's neighbours shouted in Yiddish that the police had entered her home. Sensing the danger, Samuel's mother ordered her two children and her sister Sylvia to hush. They remained holed up in their flat for a fortnight, despite repeated visits by the police, before an acquaintance helped them to flee Paris. Hiding in a freight carriage, they managed to reach Tarascon, in the south of France, before moving on to Toulouse.

When the so-called "free zone" was also occupied by the Germans in November 1942, the family had to flee again, this time to the Isère region controlled by Italian forces. They hid in Vizille, a few kilometres from Grenoble. The family moved back to Paris in August 1944 following France's Liberation. Chawa resumed her catering work, waiting for her husband's return. But Izrael never made it back. Samuel's father was murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with an estimated 1.1 million people, most of them Jews. After helping his mother, Samuel went on to study physics and become a university professor. This picture shows my mother seated and holding my little sister Suzanne, who was 3 at the time. The oaf standing behind them, that's me, having just turned 12. You can see I'm wearing a yellow star, just like my mum. The picture was taken for my father, who was at the camp in Beaune-la-Rolande, waiting to be deported. We knew he would be sent away, but we didn't know where. We wanted him to have an image of who we were and how much we loved him. We hoped it would help him cherish the memory of his wife and kids.

The photograph was taken shortly before the roundup, in June 1942. It's a memory of our lives before the endless escape, running away from roundups, denunciations and deportation. I cannot forget those days, it's impossible. That's why this picture is so dear to me; and why every time I look at it, I see everything we went through.



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Betty Grinbert was born in Paris on May 16, 1932 shortly after her parents' arrival from Poland. Abraham worked as a ladies' tailor, assisted by his wife Cywia. Betty's sister Fanny was born in January 1934, followed seven years later by their brother Paul. Cywia was at the maternity ward when Abraham was summoned to the local police station in May 1941 as part of the "green ticket roundup". He showed up with his two daughters but was eventually sent home, the officers not knowing what to do with the girls. The family had no such luck the next year, however, when two plainclothes police officers came knocking on their door early in the morning of July 16. The officers ordered them to get ready to leave, to which Cywia answered that she would rather take her own life. Unsure about what to do, the officers went back to the police station and returned half an hour later. This time they took Abraham with them, leaving the rest of the family behind due to Paul's young age. Betty's father was sent to Drancy and later deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on July 22, 1942. After her husband's arrest, Cywia decided to leave the family apartment and move

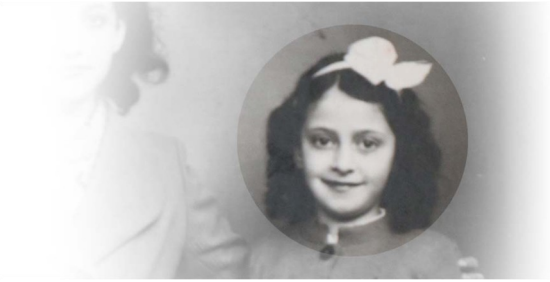
to a safer place in the Belleville neighbourhood, in eastern Paris. Betty fell ill, suffering from a heart murmur. She and her siblings were sent to the village of Chierry, in the Aisne department east of the capital, but Paul developed tuberculous meningitis and died in 1944 – far from his mother, who was unable to leave Paris and be at his side. Following France's Liberation, Cywia and her two daughters waited in vain for Abraham's return. Betty's father was murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau. She decided to follow in his footsteps and open her own clothing store. I found my father's wallet after my mother passed away. He had his identity card with him on the day of the Vél d'Hiv roundup, but he left his wallet behind. I found a receipt for his Singer sewing machine inside. It's all I have that's left of him, along with two cupboards in my living room. But I love the wallet best because he carried it with him and touched it. I still like to hold it in my hands. I loved my father. I can't explain how much I adored him. My mother used to say that I fell ill because of him, from crying so much. I never stopped grieving for my father after that day.



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Rachel Jedinak was born in Paris on April 30, 1934, the youngest of two daughters. Her parents Abraham and Chana left their native Poland in the 1920s, fleeing poverty and anti-Semitism. Her father, a carpenter, joined the French Foreign Legion when war broke out. Half of his regiment was decimated during the German invasion of the Ardennes in May 1940. He was demobilised and returned to Paris following France's defeat. A year later, on May 14, Abraham was summoned to the Tourelles barracks during the "green ticket roundup", then interned in the camp of Beaune-la-Rolande. He was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on June 28, 1942.

Following her husband's arrest, Chana worked odd jobs to feed her two girls. She left them with their grandparents on the eve of the Vél d'Hiv roundup, after hearing rumours of imminent arrests. But the housekeeper reported them to the police. The next morning, Chana saw Rachel and her 13-year-old sister Louise return home, escorted by officers. All three were led to the Bellevilloise, a former workers' cooperative in eastern Paris

where Jews from the Ménilmontant neighbourhood were rounded up before being sent to the Vélodrome d'Hiver. Understanding the danger at once, Chana ordered her daughters to escape using an emergency exit. When Rachel refused to leave her mother's side, she slapped her to ensure she would obey. Chana was sent to the internment camp in Drancy and later deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, on July 29, 1942.

Rachel and Louise were able to slip out of the Bellevilloise, aided by policemen who chose to look the other way, and run back to their grandparents. They survived another roundup on February 11, 1943, escaping from a police station. The sisters were then sent to separate hiding places in Château-Renault, near Tours, before returning to Paris after the Liberation. They waited for many long months for their parents to return, but neither Chana nor Abraham survived Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Rachel later married another son of Holocaust deportees. In the 1990s she joined the Comité Tlemcen, a charity best known for placing plaques outside Paris schools in memory of the 6,200 Jewish pupils from the French capital who were deported during the war. To this day, she continues her tireless memorial work, passing on her testimony to younger generations.



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Agnès Buisson was born in Paris born on September 8, 1933, to parents of Polish origin. Her father Srul and her mother Chuma left their native Warsaw in 1925, with their eldest son Victor. Srul, a printer and binder, had to switch to leatherworking in France, while Chuma found work as a seamstress. In September 1939, Srul volunteered to fight for France and was sent to the front line. He was demobilised following the armistice of June 1940, returning to his family in Paris. A few months later, Victor was detained during the "green ticket roundup" and interned at the camp of Beaune-la-Rolande. He managed to escape and reach the unoccupied "free zone" in Lyon, where he joined the French Resistance, eventually rising up the ranks to become a commander in the *Francs-tireurs et partisans français* (FTP). Victor encouraged his parents and sister to join him, but Srul refused to believe the family were at risk in France, the "land of human rights", which had welcomed them years before. On July 16, 1942, officers came knocking on their door. Chuma told her husband not to open, but he complied with police orders

and the family were sent to the Vélodrome d'Hiver. In the waiting line, after warning her husband, Chuma managed to persuade policemen to let her step aside with her daughter, claiming Agnès had a pressing need. She then ripped off their yellow stars and they slipped away to the nearest metro station. Srul, on the other hand, walked into the Vél d'Hiv. He was interned in Drancy and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau on July 19, 1942. Chuma and Agnès joined Victor in Lyon, before going into hiding in the village of Méaudre, in the forested mountains of the Vercors, where Agnès fell into a deep silence. They moved back to Paris after the Liberation, learning upon their return that Srul had been murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Agnès proved to be an excellent student. She went on to become a doctor and raise a family. Decades later, in 2021, the primary school in Méaudre was renamed after her. "We took this picture to send it to my brother in the 'free zone'. We're alive in the photo and then six months later, we're dead. It's an image captured in time. My father was dead just months later. (The French philosopher Roland) Barthes said photographs show that humans existed. Above all, this one shows that my father was gone. I was never able to mourn him, to get over his death. My father was always with me. He was alive. There can be no closure when there is no burial, it's impossible."



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Bernard Nusbaum was born in Paris on June 4, 1938, to parents who had recently emigrated from Poland. His father Matys worked in the leather and hosiery industries. During the "green ticket roundup", Matys was arrested and taken to the internment camp in Pithiviers, where his wife and child were able to visit him until he was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, on June 25, 1942.

Three weeks later, Bernard and his mother Ida were woken up by policemen who ordered them to pack their belongings and took them to the Vélodrome d'Hiver. The horror of the stadium, where some 8,000 people were crammed together for several days, would haunt Bernard to this day. Aware of the danger, Ida decided to escape at all costs. She took advantage of a change of guards to sneak out of the stadium and find refuge in a nearby café. Luckily, Ida and Bernard came across police officers who were part of the French Resistance and offered to help. The officers tore off their yellow stars and escorted them to the metro station.

From then on Bernard lived as a "hidden child" – first in rural Creuse, in central France, and then back in the Paris region, hiding in the suburbs of Saint-Germain-en-Laye and Montfermeil, until the war ended. He was finally reunited with his mother after the Liberation. They waited for many months for Matys to return, but he never made it back from Auschwitz-Birkenau. Bernard later worked in the clothing industry, following in his father's footsteps, before starting a career in politics. He is now the honorary deputy mayor of Yerres, south of Paris. "This picture frame holds the few photographs I have. Bottom left, there's my mother with a yellow star, by my side. There's also a picture of my father, who was murdered in a gas chamber, with my mother. I was only 4 at the time, but I can easily recognise him. There's also a photo of me with my little cousins Suzanne and Paulette, who never came back from deportation. It's all I have of them. They'll never come back again."





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The Lost Synagogue of Aleppo

A new virtual reality exhibit at the Israel Museum brings to life the Great Synagogue, and the great collapse of multinational Jewish life
BY [MATTI FRIEDMAN](#) Appeared in the Tablet Magazine June 2022

One day in 2016 the end came, again, for the Great Synagogue of Aleppo. Fighting between the Assad government and rebels had ripped the ancient city apart and hundreds of thousands of people were already dead across Syria, so it doesn't seem right to dwell on the loss of a building—but this was, perhaps, the greatest building in the Jewish world. Prayers began at the site, scholars believe, around the fifth century CE, maybe earlier, and continued until the 1990s, when the last Jews left the city. There were breaks only for events like the Mongol invasion that leveled much of Aleppo in the 13th century, for the occasional devastating earthquake, and for the Arab riots and arson that accompanied the United Nations vote on Israel's creation in 1947. No other synagogue on earth embodied 15 continuous centuries of Jewish life and memory.

Since the community's final departure, the building had been empty but intact, guarded by the regime, upkeep covered discreetly by members of the Aleppo Jewish diaspora. But photos after the 2016 fighting showed pulverized stonework, a courtyard full of rubble, twisted iron railings, and Hebrew engravings blasted off the walls. The Great Synagogue was gone.

And yet last week I walked past the high bimah, 20 steps off the ground, illuminated by Syrian sunlight pouring through the colonnades. I saw a leaky pump in the courtyard surrounded by gleaming puddles, and took in the paint peeling

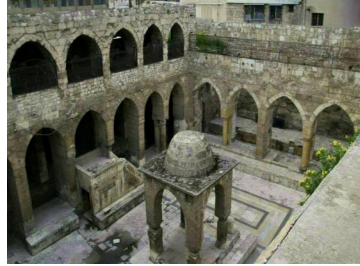
on the columns and the deep medieval windows. There was no damage. It was all so vivid I put out a hand to touch a wall, forgetting that it wasn't real. I paused by the famous "sealed ark," one of the synagogue's seven repositories for Torah scrolls, which was sealed at a time and for a reason that no one remembers. The ark was home, according to local legend, to a magical snake that appeared on occasion to save the community from its enemies. I read the plaque honoring a donor named Eli Bar Natan, inscribed sometime before the ninth century. I peeked into the Cave of Elijah, a nook that housed the Aleppo Codex, the most perfect copy of the Hebrew Bible, for 600 years.

It was while writing a book about the codex that I heard many hours of recollections of the Great Synagogue from elderly Aleppo Jews, and spent many more hours imagining the place. Many of the memories had nothing to do with ritual: One elderly woman remembered the eerie whispering sounds she heard in the building's corners as a little girl, and one spot where you could stand to feel a strange breath of air. The synagogue had seen so many human generations, had heard the name of God pronounced and the story of creation repeated so many times that at some point it seemed to have come alive itself.

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There was a Jewish place of worship on the site of the Aleppo Synagogue since late Antiquity, perhaps from as early as the 5th century C.E. The oldest surviving inscription is from the year 834 C.E.

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I crossed from the old part of the building used by the original Arabic-speaking community, the musta'arabin, into the brighter "new" wing built for refugees from Spain after the expulsion of 1492—and then the simulation crashed. A Windows screen popped up and an apologetic technician took my headset; the exhibit wasn't open to the public yet, and there were still a few glitches in the software. It took a few moments to remember where I was, and that the synagogue was still gone.

This gallery at the Israel Museum, the one called Jewish Art and Life, has several recreated synagogues, like the beautiful one from Vittorio Veneto circa 1700, and one from Suriname with a remarkable sand floor. But the new exhibit, which opened this month, marks the first time the museum has used virtual reality. The "exhibit" is little more than four chairs and four headsets. The curators, who hail from an earlier generation, seem a bit defensive about the technology, aware that it might be deemed frivolous.

They make sure to explain that this simulation isn't a fictional recreation, but is based entirely on a remarkable series of 51 photographs shot in November 1947 by an Armenian photographer working for a Jewish woman, Sarah Shammah, whose family preserved the historical treasure in their Jerusalem home.

This is not, in other words, hi-tech entertainment, but a display of photographic documentation using new means. "Sarah's photos are the original artifacts," said Rachel Zarfaty, one of the curators. "All we did was change the platform."

One day that month in 1947, just weeks before the outbreak of Israel's Independence War, Shammah had the ancient building recorded in its entirety by the photographer, whose name has been lost. She seems to have had a premonition.

Only days later, on Nov. 29, the United Nations voted to partition the British Mandate territory of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, upon which a mob in Aleppo rioted and torched Jewish homes, shops, and synagogues, including much of the Great Synagogue. Similar riots in other cities spelled the end for Jewish life in Arab countries.

Most of Aleppo's Jews escaped immediately afterwards, though a remnant limped on for a few more decades under the boot of Syria's military dictatorship, praying in part of the building.

After the 1947 riot, Shammah made it to Jerusalem via Beirut with the negatives. The borders were cut a few months later, and she never saw her city again.



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The idea of a virtual-reality resurrection of the synagogue originated not with the museum but with a group of four creative partners, two in Israel and two in Berlin, with backgrounds in film, history, and tech. One of them is Avi Dabach, 50, an Israeli director whose great-grandfather Ezra Dabach was the sexton of the Great Synagogue. Avi's grandfather grew up in an adjacent apartment and used to tell him stories about the building: "He'd say, I can't describe how beautiful it is, and when Israel and Syria make peace I'll take you there on the first plane," he remembered. The first plane has yet to take off, but five years ago, Shammah's son Avraham, now 89, showed Avi his mother's photographs. The partners spent years turning them into a virtual reality simulation. When you put on the headset at the Israel Museum, you're visiting the synagogue on a specific day in November 1947, the last moment that the community was whole. One scenario allows you to take a tour with a ghostly simulation of Asher Baghdadi, the sexton who took over from Avi's great-grandfather in 1928. A second scenario is a dramatization of the events around Shammah's visit to the synagogue as the Middle East imploded around her.

The precise details of what happened to the real building remain unclear, but it happened as Assad's army fought to regain control of Aleppo from rebel forces in 2016. The slightly younger Jobar Synagogue in Damascus had already been

destroyed two years earlier. There's a blurry photo showing armed fighters in the Aleppo synagogue, and then there are other photos that show walls riddled with bullet holes and others reduced to rubble. Two years later, two 360-degree images on Google Street View ([here](#) and [here](#)) show signs of a cleanup, but the building's a shell.

The recreated synagogues of the Israel Museum, including this one, are beautiful and memorable and deeply sad. The curatorial energy and creativity can't obscure what all of this tells us, which is that the Jewish world is contracting.

The fact is that in the lifetime of our parents and grandparents, Jews were eradicated in much of the Christian world and erased from the world of Islam. It's not just the Great Synagogue of Aleppo—it's the houses of worship in Tataouine or Oran, the synagogues of Galicia and Romania, the ones in grand Italian towns and obscure Polish hamlets.

And what about Cochin, or Kaifeng, or, for that matter, Knoxville, the Carolinas, and the Caribbean? Much of the tenuous, beautiful, and strange variety of Jewish life that existed a century ago is gone. The vast majority of what remains plays out in the state of Israel and a few big cities in North America.

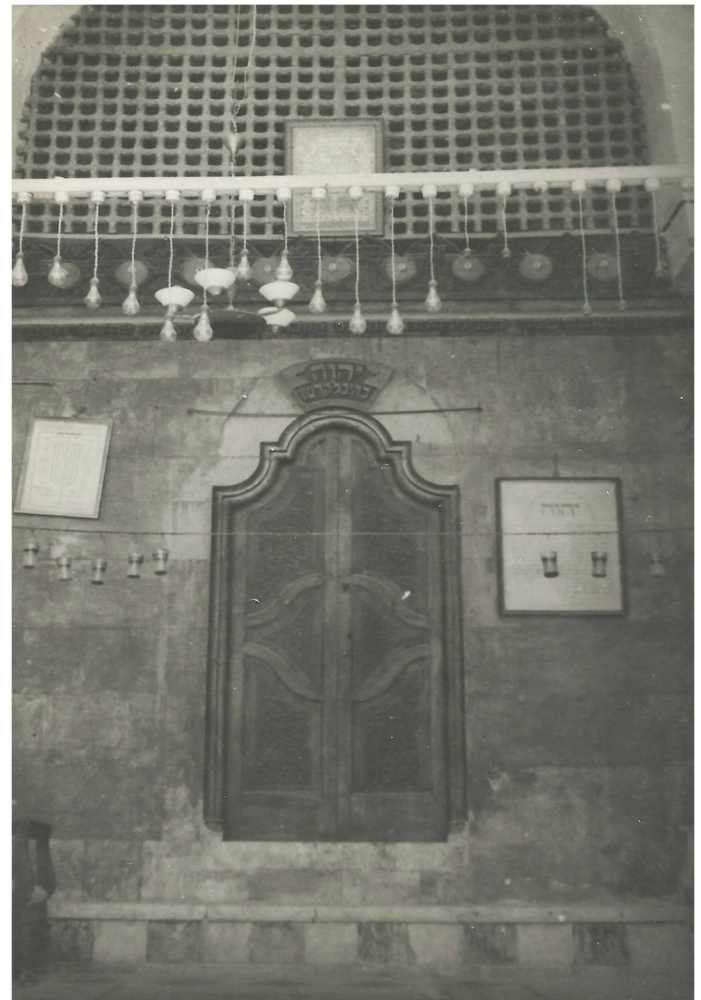


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These early buildings were damaged after the Mongol occupation of Aleppo during the 13th century and then turned into a mosque. The central synagogue was rebuilt at some point in the early 15th century. It had later on undergone a series of modifications until its destruction during the violent attacks against Jews by the local population in December 1947.

The new simulation had the effect of bringing the Aleppo synagogue to life for a moment. The impression of being in that building, even if it was only virtual, was so potent for me that it still hasn't quite worn off.

Everyone who can visit the simulation at the Israel Museum should go. But tech has a way of showing us something and leaving us hollow. When the headset came off, I was left with the same feeling I've had when reconnecting online with a friend from the past—the knowledge of what existed not long ago, and how truly gone it is.

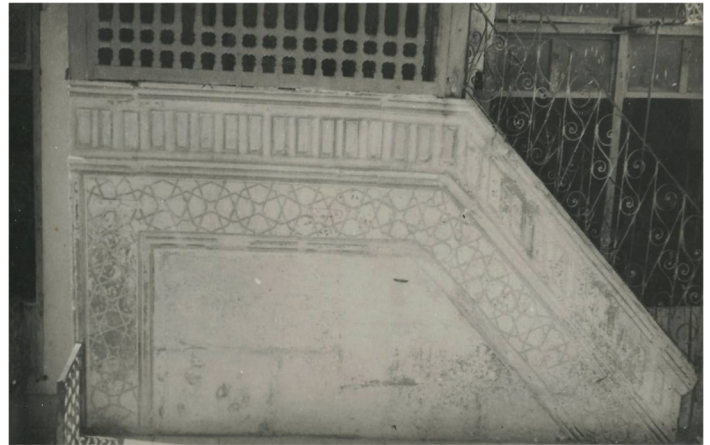




Sarah Shammah

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The Aleppo Synagogue included from the very beginning an adjacent courtyard that was used as an open-air synagogue in the summertime. Some hints in the Talmud suggest that it was customary for a synagogue to have its roof removed during the summer (Baba Batra, 3, p.2) and indeed in several places Jews preferred to pray in outdoors places, like Rabbi Asi and Rabbi Ami who prayed "among the columns" in Tiberias (Berachot, 8, pp1-2). Synagogues in Baghdad, Iraq, did not have a roof either, except over the Holy Ark and the tevah (elevated platform).

The Aleppo Synagogue edifice was divided into three main sections: a central courtyard that separated the western wing, where in modern times the "mustarabi" community used to worship, from the eastern section built at a later time during the 16th century and which served as Beth Midrash and prayer hall of the "Francos", i.e. Sephardi Jews that settled in the town after the Spanish exile and other European Jews that happened to sojourn in Aleppo. An additional enclosed small courtyard was bordering the eastern wing farther to the east.

The western hall had three heichaloth (Holy Arks); there were another three heichaloth on the southern wall ("the Zion Wall") of the courtyard, and a seventh Holy Ark, located in the eastern wing close to the courtyard, also on the southern wall pointing to the direction of Jerusalem that was

named Heichal Eliyahu or Me'arat Eliyahu ("The Cave of Eliyahu") and in which the old Torah and Bible manuscripts – the Ketarim ("Crowns") also called the Taj by the Aleppo Jews were kept. The "Jewel" of the Crowns" is the Hebrew manuscript of the Bible written by the scribe Shlomo Ben Buya'a during the first half of the 10th century (or 896?) and then verified, vocalized and pointed by Aaron Ben-Asher in Tiberias.

It was taken to Egypt where it was seen by Maimonides, who considered it to be the most perfect of all versions and used it as an example and standard of the Bible text. Sometime towards the end of the 14th century the manuscript was taken into the custody of the Jewish community of Aleppo. Keter Aram Tzova (The Aleppo Codex), the most authoritative manuscript of the Masoretic text of the Bible, was kept in the Central Synagogue of Aleppo for some 500 years until 1947. Apparently it was damaged in the fire of the synagogue in 1947, and thought to be lost until 1958, when it was brought to Israel. Now most of its pages, 295 of the original 487, are safeguarded in Jerusalem, Israel.

Photos above : Ruins of the Synagogue, Aleppo, 1979

Photo:s Judith Feld, Canada.

The Dr. Ronald Feld Fund for Jews in Arab Lands of the Beth Tzedek Congregation

The Oster Visual Documentation Center, ANU – Museum of the Jewish People