A Visit with Rebbi Bouaz

[This essay was written in 1978. Conditions may have changed since then.]

In January 1977 I undertook a trip to Tunisia in order to visit what remains of its ancient Jewish community. My purpose was to collect materials for a projected Judeo-Arabic dictionary, and a few words of explanation are in order. Arabic has been a language of Jews longer that it has been a language of Moslems, since Jews were speaking Arabic before the meteoric rise of Islam in the seventh century C.E. One of the oldest known Arabic poets, Samel ben Adiya by name, was a Jew, and has become a by-word among the Arabs for the virtue of loyalty which he displayed to an unusual degree. However, Jews have generally written Arabic in *Hebrew* letters, since for them the Arabic alphabet was inextricably bound up with the Moslem religion, to which, of course, they did not adhere. This has had a strange effect. The Moslems have continued to write a language rather close to the language of the Koran, while their spoken language has changed greatly with the passage of the centuries. The spoken dialects, which are virtually separate languages, remain for the most part unwritten. The Jews, uninfluenced by the Koran, have written in a fashion reflecting their current spoken language, and hence their writings offer evidences for the Arabic language which are not available in the Arabic script.

Hundreds of books have been printed in Judeo-Arabic, as this Arabic "Yiddish" is called--sermons, commentaries, Bible translations, poems, novels, history. Only in Tunisia does the Judeo-Arabic press remain active--and probably by the time you read this, it will have ceased forever with the imminent closing of the last Jewish presses. It was this world of which I was in search.

Many people expressed surprise to me that I was attempting a trip to Tunisia, being under the impression that foreign Jews are not permitted to enter the country. This is not so. Jews may enter freely, worship with the local Jews -- and enjoy a meal at a fine kosher restaurant in Tunis which goes by the odd name of "Robinson's", and which, incidentally, is owned by a Muslim. It is supervised by the Chief Rabbinate of Tunis, and the manager is Jewish. "Kosher Service" is announced prominently on the outside. I had no Israeli visa in my passport, but was told later that even this would probably not have

caused problems. Tunisian Jews travel freely between Tunis and Israel. They purchase a ticket in Tunis good for a specified number of kilometers after their first European stop, and this is exchanged for a ticket to Israel. On the onset of the last Middle East War, President Habib Bourguiba appeared on national television, and warned that anyone who harmed a Jew in Tunisia would be liable to the death penalty. He apparently wished to avert the ugly synagogue desecration which took place during the Six Day War. Of course, the regime of Bourguiba does not care for anything which interferes with public order, and police supervision is stringent. During a trip I took on an inter-city bus, a police officer entered the bus and required each passenger to produce his identity card. One young man's papers were not in order, and the bus stopped at the next police station where he was taken off for further examination. The bus waited for him, and after an interval he resumed his seat, having apparently satisfactorily explained himself. The identity cards issued to Tunisian Jews are the same as those issued to Muslims.

After minimal customs and immigration formalities in Tunis, I took the train the next day for Sfax, on my way to the island of Jerba, the reputed home of the Lotos-eaters, where the most active Jewish community is situated. The train was quite modern, and after four hours we arrived at Sfax, the second city of Tunisia, passing by the impressive Roman coliseum at El Djem, which is in a remarkable state of preservation. Here I changed to a small, rather dilapidated train which meandered at a leisurely pace to the desert oasis of Gabès, where the presence of water amid so much aridity causes the palms to sprout and the olive trees to flourish. Gabès still has a tiny Jewish community; just a week before I arrived, the owner of the Café Soleil there had taken his infant son on the long trek to Tunis to have him circumcized, apparently preferring the ministrations of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's representative, who is also a mohel (ritual circumcizor), to those of the ritual circumcizors at less distance.

In Gabès I boarded a bus for Midoun, a small town on the island of Jerba, where I arrived, via the ancient Roman causeway, twelve hours after my departure from Tunis to the sounds of the Muezzin summoning the faithful to prayer with his cry of "Allah is most great!" A taxi completed my trip to a hotel, rather empty at that time of year, but having some tourists from Germany and Italy.

At the hotel I requested a phone book, in order to check if my contact in Jerba

had a phone. This evoked a strange response. They were apparently unused to a visitor knowing any of the locals, and after much delay and discussion among themselves, finally produced a dog-eared phone book. After satisfying myself that he did not not have a telephone, I took a taxi the next day to Hara Kbira (the large ghetto) a village a short distance from Houmt Souk, which is the major community on the island.

The first sight which greeted my eyes was that of a shochet (ritual slaughterer), slaughtering chickens on the street. Next to the wall bespattered with the blood of many generations of chickens which had died to sustain Jerban jewry, a crowd of children watched as the creatures flapped in their death-throes. We arrived at the house of Rebbi Bouaz Haddad, where I received a warm welcome, which was followed by similarly warm hospitality for the remainder of my visit. His stone house is large, consisting of one storey, built around a central court. In the court is a covered well into which Mrs. Haddad throws a bucket to draw water. A few steps away is the door of the privy, nothing more fancy that a hole in the ground, and its proximity to the well explained perhaps the advice I had received in Tunis not to drink water in Jerba. I was ushered into a room devoid of furniture. A small table and two chairs were brought in, and a small glass of strong coffee was offered to me. Rebbi Bouaz entered, and we sat to eat. A delicious soup was served; if any bacteria had survived the cooking, they were surely killed off by the quantity of pepper which had been added. In another dish was brought a huge mound of couscous, the traditional steamed semolina dish of North Africa. In another plate was fried egg and squash, and in another two fried fish. A spoon was used to moisten the couscous with the soup, but aside from that the meal was eaten with the hands, with the help of home baked bread. By the time I left, I had learned to eat fried eggs with my hands with some degree of efficiency, and had acquired a great liking for the tasty Tunisian cuisine.

At no time did men and women eat together. The women stay close to the low stove on the floor of the kitchen, where they appear to eat their meals.

My host announced his intention to visit the market, and invited me to accompany him. We walked to Houmt Souk a kilometer or so away, and went first to the fish market, where the fish are auctioned in lots of varying size, the fish being tied together and carried hanging from a string. There he purchased two large fish, and later on, fruit and vegetables. We also visited the shop of his son, who is a tailor. We then boarded a donkey cart to return, driven by a

boy about ten years old. He began to scream: "Hara, hara," in order to fill up the empty seats. Another boarded, and then an old man who appeared to suffer from Parkinson's disease, and had to be lifted to his seat. The young driver began to lash his donkey, who did his best, but got stuck on a hill. Two passengers got down, and a passerby gave a push to get us going again.

I spent some time in my host's little bookshop in the Hara, and in the evening we went to buy *brik*. The vendor took a circular, very thin piece of pastry, placed on it a little spinach, folded the pastry in half enclosing the egg, and tossed it into a pot of bubbling oil. The result is delicious and quite filling.

For Friday night I was invited to the guest room in the house of Rebbi Bouaz, since it was too far to walk from my hotel. There was absolutely no heat in the house, and Jerba can be--and was--quite cold in winter. Blankets and my overcoat helped to keep me cosy. The Hara has had electricity for the past twenty years, and my host's son rigged up an interesting "time clock" to turn off the lights on Sabbath. A break had been made in the main wire, and a small piece of wire placed between the two ends. This was attached by a short cord to an old fashioned alarm clock with an outside bell. While such an arrangement on a 240-volt wire can hardly be considered UL-listed, it worked. At 10 p.m. the alarm went off, the movement of the bell clapper jerked out the wire, and the lights went out. Rebbi Bouaz complained that the previous week the cord was not taut enough, and the lights stayed on all night. I told him that our time clock too does not always work.

On Shabbat morning we went to one of the dozen synagogues in the Hara. No women attended. There are benches around the walls, but the interior is devoid of furniture, apart from the reading desk which stands in the middle in the usual Sephardic arrangement. The service was read rapidly, and when the Sefer Torah (the scroll of the Law) was removed from the Ark, the entire congregation accompanied it to the desk where it was read upright in its silver case.

The *Cohen* (man of Aaronic descent) always gets two portions of the law read to him in Jerba, since there are no Levites to take the second spot normally reserved for them. According to local tradition there is a good reason for this. After the end of the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.E., Ezra the scribe came to Jerba, where some Jews had fled to ask them to return to the Holy Land. He particularly pleaded with the Levites, who were needed to sing

in the Temple service, but they refused, as they were quite happy on their sunny island. Ezra cursed the Levites, and they all died, with the result that no Levite lives on Jerba till this day. (The Yemenite Jews have a similar story about a visit from Ezra.) I was invited to read the *haftara* (prophetic reading) and the *musaf* (additional service) which I did. My style is, of course, somewhat different from theirs, but they seemed to appreciate the change.

At the sabbath meal the women appeared briefly to hear *kiddush* (the prayer over wine sanctifying the day) and then withdrew. Apart from my host and myself, there were his married son (whose wife stayed in her own home), his grandson and two unmarried sons, one of whom excused himself after *kiddush* and soon reappeared more comfortably clad in pajamas. This combination of easy informality combined with strict adherence to tradition constitutes the charm of this unusual community. The meal was enormous, vast quantities of couscous, *pashtida* (a kind of rissole) and spicy vegetables. On another plate was *adafina*, a kind of meat soup which had been kept warm in the communal oven. After the synagogue we had gone to pick up the *adafina*; how each family recognized its own pot so quickly was a mystery to me. Carrying on the sabbath is permitted, since they have an *erub*. an arrangement which makes it possible to bring home the sabbath meal. The youngest son had taken a straw bag to synagogue in which to carry home the pot.

In the afternoon we went to another synagogue, where a special service was being held in memory of a previous chief rabbi. The synagogue was packed with some four hundred men and boys. The present chief rabbi gave a discourse, after which his blessing was auctioned for the support of the synagogue. A man walked briskly around, his eyes flashing, looking rapidly to right and left and shouting: "The blessing of the rabbi! The Lord bless and keep you! Twenty-five, twenty-six. The Lord bless and keep you! Twenty-seven, twenty-eight. The blessing of the Rabbi! Twenty-nine, thirty..." This went on until the sum of 250 dinars was reached--about $590 at the admittedly unrealistic official rate of exchange. The successful bidder approached the rabbi, who placed his hands on his head and intoned: "May He who blessed our fathers bless you and hear the voice of your prayer...the Lord bless and keep you..." The man then kissed the rabbi's hand and returned to his place.

In the evening the family gathered for the recital of the *habdala* which marks the division between the sabbath and the ordinary days of the week. When Rebbi Bouaz took hold of some fragrant leaves to recite a blessing on them, he

began to laugh. No ordinary laughter was this, but roars of laughter, until the tears ran down his cheeks and his sides shook. His sudden mirth was not shared by his family, who looked on quite impassively. This was done in order to ensure that he and his family might laugh on all the common days of the week. It makes excellent sense to laugh at least weekly; quite therapeutic.

I visited the school next morning. The boys learn religious subjects, including Bible and history, and one secular subject: arithmetic. They do not learn to read Arabic, a dialect of which they speak, nor French, which is the most widely known European language. While I was there, the fourth grade was practicing long multiplication. The children were anxious to know if I came from the "city of the Admor," that is, New York, where the Lubavitcher Rebbe lives. His representative, who himself runs a fine Jewish school in Tunis, visits from time to time to inspect the school in Jerba. The children were well-behaved, and were encouraged to speak in Hebrew. These days they write Hebrew in the Ashkenazi script used in Israel, although they also learn the traditional Rashi script of the Sephardim, which they used exclusively until the foundation of the State of Israel.

For lunch, I went to a friend of the youngest son of my host, who exerted himself greatly in my interest. The wine, trodden by foot at home, I was told, was sweet and excellent. During the sumptuous meal, a rooster stopped in to visit. Shimon has no need for a freezer to keep his stock of food; it walks around the house. Shimon is twenty-three years old, and, like many Jerban Jews, works in gold and silver for his living. He wears a French style beret, rather than the red Turkish cap worn by the older generation, called a sheshiyah. He has abandoned too the baggy drawers that his father wears, but still wear the large brown cloak as an outer garment. He showed me his workshop, and his father showed me how he works. Taking gold wire, he deftly formed it into a fish, which is a symbol of fertility and a favorite motif in local crafts.

The institutions of the Jews of Jerba retain their vitality, but change is on the way. Even though most Jews there earn a good living in handicrafts and other skilled trades, and have no fears for their personal safety, many have left for France and Israel. One young man told me: "I want to go and live in Israel, but my mother will not let me go. She fears I will be taken into the army and get killed. I say to her: 'I am not afraid,' but she won't understand." There is now a government language school on the island, and some of the young Jews are

learning English, a language virtually unknown in Tunisia at the present time. One of them told me that seven students began the course, with an American teacher, four Muslims and three Jews, but only the Jews came back for the second year. They cannot fail to be influenced by the broadcasts on national radio, which exhort the men to treat their women the way Europeans do. "The Tunisian of the old days," declares a soothing female voice, "never shared with his wife the details of his financial status, nor of his day-to-day work. In the street she would invariably walk a few steps behind him. Her husband chose her clothing, and decided the menu for the day. The modern Tunisian, on the other hand, shares his worries and his hopes with his wife. She walks next to him on the street. He opens the door politely, and lets her go first." The older generation of Jerban Jewry has not yet reached this pre-Women's lib stage--already archaic sounding to American ears--but there seems little doubt that the younger generation will. The family sits on the floor to watch the recently installed television set--but the Tunisians they see on television are sitting on chairs, just like Europeans.

The community has been traumatized from time to time by ex-Jerbans who have come back to visit. One young emigrant to Israel who returned at Passover time insisted on eating bread in his parents' house to show how far behind he had left what were for him the shackles of tradition. His parents' shock and dismay can only be imagined. Was such the promised redemption? How sad it is that with all our achievements we have found no way to skip this stage where tradition is thrown to the winds in the interest of modernization, before proceeding to the stage where people realise that there is a basic need for roots, for a link with those who have gone before, for a sense of community. One wonders if that young man's children will want to know about their rich Tunisian-Jewish heritage, and what, if anything, he will by then be able to tell them. Will he recall that his elders roared with laughter on Saturday nights, so that they might smile all the next six days, or will a tranquilizer be his only remedy for the cares of the humdrum week?

NEXT

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