Are There Really Jews in BAHRAIN?

Do Jews actually live in Bahrain, a rocky island off the coast of Saudi Arabia, which most people associate with OPEC sheiks clad in flowing, white robes? Well, there is a shul, dating back to the 1930s, locked behind a heavy, metal door. And there remain about forty Jews, some intermarried, some single — a remnant of a thriving community that existed for over a thousand years. A look at Jewish Bahrain, or what's left of it, through the eyes of two recent travelers

Dr. Ari Greenspan and Rabbi Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Not terribly long ago, Bahrain was little more than a forgotten, rocky island in the Persian Gulf, off the coast of Saudi Arabia. Fishing and pearl diving were both local hobbies and business activities. In the eighteenth century, the island became a British stopover and trading point, but even then Bahrain had little glamour: At the height of the British Empire, with protectorates in such exotic locations as Africa, India, and the Far East, few people gave any thought to Bahrain.

That was then. Today, oil deposits have made the Persian Gulf nation one of the richest pieces of real estate in the world. Oil profits have given the kingdom the luxury to offer free health care and higher education to all citizens, and like other nations in the region, the country is an international center, with a rich mix of Indians, Pakistanis, and Arabs making up the population of approximately 800,000. But whereas there are no virtually no Jews in the other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — which includes Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates — there is a small Jewish community in Bahrain.

We traveled there for a firsthand view of the people and sights of this little-known Jewish enclave.

Jewish Bahrain: Predating Islam Historically, Bahrain has been good to the Jews. The Jewish presence there goes back more than 1,000 years, predating Islam. In modern times, Jewish merchants from Iraq, Iran, and India made their way to this Persian Gulf nation in the late nineteenth century and built a modest community. To be sure, Bahrain was never a flourishing Jewish center, but generations of Jews left their mark on the country.

At its peak in the 1930s and early 1940s, the community may have numbered as many as 1,500. The Jewish influx was due in part to the discovery of oil in Bahrain in 1932, modernization, closer ties with Great Britain, and a subsequent influx of foreigners. As late as 1948, there were nearly 600 Jews on the island. But following World War II and the establishment of Israel, anti-Jewish sentiment spread across the Arab world, including Bahrain. Rioters repeatedly targeted the Jewish community, several Jewish homes were destroyed, and the shul was desecrated, with all its Torah scrolls stolen. (The Torahs were returned in 1985 and transferred to a London shul.) As a result, many Jews fled Bahrain for Israel, the UK, and the United States. In the early 1960s there were still about 200 Jews in Bahrain, but riots that followed the 1967 Six-Day War drove out the majority of those as well. By 1970, the community had dwindled to a fraction of itself, and today only approximately forty Jews remain.

According to community historian Nancy Elly Khedouri, these Jews enjoy full political rights, and the current regime is supportive. In her definitive 2007 history of Bahraini



The well-maintained Jewish cemetery. The older graves lack any identifying information on their tombstones, but the more recent ones bear Hebrew and English epitaphs



The now empty shul. All that is left in the locked building are the *bimah* and some benches

THE DIPLOMATIC FRONT

While Bahrain's Jewish community seems secure and relatively stable, an outside look reveals its reluctance to make waves.

Eli Avidar, an Israeli diplomat posted on the nearby island nation of Qatar from 1999 to 2001, told **Mishpacha** that whereas some Persian Gulf countries developed close commercial ties with Israel during the 1993–2000 Oslo era and seemed to be moving toward full diplomatic relations with the Jewish state, Bahrain remained cool toward Israel.

"Israel and Bahrain maintained some ties during the Oslo years, but the Jewish community in Bahrain played no role in that process," said Avidar. "The community has its history, its connection to the Jewish community in Iraq, and some members of the community serve in the local assembly. But Jews as a group in Bahrain have no political power, and Bahrain is largely dependent on the country's economic ties with Saudi Arabia. That alliance is crucial for Bahrain, and since Saudi Arabia maintains the most radical stance in the Arab world against normalization with Israel, Bahrain has never moved to develop ties." As a result, Avidar said, there was never a chance that Bahrain would establish diplomatic relations with Israel.

"During the 1990s, Shimon Peres met at least once with Sheikh Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, the emir of Bahrain and heir apparent to the Bahraini throne, but that was about it. Formal relations never came close to materializing, and Israel never opened a trade office in Bahrain," he said.

— Avi Friedman

Jewry, *From Our Beginning to Present Day*, Khedouri reports that when Emir Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, father of current monarch King Hamad, died in 1999, the new king assured the Jewish community that tolerance and freedom of worship would continue on the island. Indeed, there is a Jewish member of parliament, and a Jewish woman (Khedouri's cousin), Houda Ezra Ebrahim Nonoo, is the country's ambassador to the United States and Canada. Khedouri's book, available in a London bookstore called "Divrei Kodesh," is even being translated into Arabic from the original English.

In addition, unlike in many other Arab countries, the government works hard to suppress Islamic fundamentalism despite close ties with Saudi Arabia, and the Jews are actually patriotic. Khedouri says they're genuinely attached to King Hamad and the royal family. She is clearly proud to have presented her book to many of these royals, and photographs of these presentations are displayed prominently in her office.

So the Jews are comfortable, but the lack of a Jewish infrastructure has led to a great lack of observance and education. The community rarely gets together for Jewish events, and some members have intermarried with the local population. Others, including the thirty-five-year-old Khedouri, have remained single.

Arab Encounters Positive relations with the royal family notwithstanding, Bahrain is an Arab country, so caution dictated that we cover our heads with something other than *kippos*. One of us wore a baseball cap, and the other donned a Muslim-style skullcap he picked up in Djerba (see **Mishpacha** #257). Nervous about exposing ourselves as Jews, we identified ourselves as American tourists. Yet it's hard for a pale-skinned Westerner with *peyos* and a long beard to hide his Jewishness. After a short while in Manama, the country's capital and largest city, a shopkeeper asked us in Arabic, "*Yahud?*"

Following a very long, uncomfortable silence, we finally answered in the affirmative (although we claimed to be from America, not Israel). Our anxiety turned out to be in vain, however: The fellow responded with a huge, warm smile and asked in Hebrew whether we'd voted for Likud or the National Union in the last elections. We were dumbstruck. It turned out that Mahmoud, who proceeded to write his name in Hebrew for us, was an Egyptian who had spent time in Israel and claimed to have Israeli friends.

Likewise, the owner of the natural medicine shop said he'd be happy to ship to Israel anything we wanted.

While these and other locals were quite comfortable speaking to us openly about both Judaism and Israel, the official stance of the regime is very much that Judaism is fine, but Israel is not. The government website that details the requirements for obtaining a visa to enter Bahrain states that "Israeli stamps in your passport mean that you will not be admitted to Bahrain." Khedouri has never been to Israel, and as far as she knows neither have any other Bahraini Jews. It's not that they don't travel — they do, plenty. Rather, out of respect for the kingdom, they won't visit any country with which Bahrain has no diplomatic ties. The party line is anti-Israel, but it's not as extreme as some other Arab states.

Before Islam The earliest source we found indicating a Jewish presence in Bahrain was in the impressive Bahraini National Museum. Describing the period when the Islamic prophet Mohammed began spreading his new religion by the sword, a museum plaque read: "In the seventh year of Al-Hijra (AD 629), the prophet Mohammed sent a letter together with Al Aala bin Al Hadhrami to Al Munthir bin Sawa Al Tamimi, the ruler of Bahrain, calling his people to accept Islam. Most accepted, but some Zoroastrians (Majoos), Christians, and Jews chose to keep their own faith."

The reference to Judaism at the museum was surprising given the tendency in other areas to avoid mention of anything Jewish. For instance, Gulf Air's in-flight magazine noted that the Biblical queen of Sheba traveled to Jerusalem to meet Shlomo HaMelech and converted to "Abrahamic monotheism," pointedly avoiding the word "Judaism."

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View of the sprawling city of Manama from our hotel window



The street on which the empty shul stands in the "souk dahab," or gold market, which was once primarily Jewish

socioeconomic development, especially in Bahrain, and the island quickly grew into a modern state, a process both caused by and leading to further immigration of foreign merchant families, including Indians, Persians, Iraqis and others, with Jews among them. The Jewish immigration started with the Yadgar family, who came from Iraq in 1880.

Jewish Bahrain Every Jewish community needs a shul, and Manama is no exception. Yet visiting the only synagogue in the region was no easy matter: The community hasn't had a minyan in decades, and most of its members who hold keys to the building were out of the country when we visited in the summer. We persisted, as the purpose of our trip was to visit Jewish sites, and our esteemed hostess arranged for a non-Jewish, native Bahraini named Aqeel to show us around.

It may have been ironic that it took a non-Jew to get us into the shul, but Aqeel turned out to be a trove of information about the Jewish community. For many years, he has worked for a local Jewish businessman, Abraham David Nonoo, and as we drove through the twisting, narrow streets of the old "souk dahab," or gold market, he explained the Jewish significance of many spots. Numerous stores had once been owned by Jews, and Khedouri told us that in the 1930s and 1940s, Al-Mutanabi Road was known as "Jews' Street," with many shops closed for Shabbos.

We found the shul, a building dating to the early 1930s, locked behind a heavy, metal door and bearing no external Jewish symbols. Only the anti-Israel stickers and graffiti on the exterior gave it away. Aqeel respectfully waited in the back as we went inside and davened. We thought about the many Jews who had walked through these alleys and through this door in order to pray, yet now this building was devoid of Jewish content. All that remained was a stark, empty room with some benches shoved into one corner and a *bimah* in the other, which once served the pious as they communed with the Master of the World. Aside from some trouble relocking the infrequently used door, our brief visit and picture taking outside the shul passed unnoticed by the locals.

From the shul, we continued toward the old Jewish cemetery. One can infer much about a community from its cemetery, and Aqeel drove us to a well-tended graveyard in the center of Manama. The neat, gated cemetery sits right across a small street from the graveyard serving the island's other minority, the Christians. It's hard to judge the age of the cemetery, as the early tombs follow the Muslim tradition of bearing no information about the deceased; they're simply a mound of stones or cement above the grave.

Near the entrance to the grounds is a room used to prepare a body for burial, including facilities to perform a *taharah*, the Jewish form of this preparation. This room was locked, but through the frosted window we saw that it was indeed equipped for funeral preparations. For many years the informal *chevra kadisha* was headed by Ezra Saleh Al-Baqal, who in keeping with Jewish tradition performed the *chesed* without remuneration. Originally from Iraq, Al-Baqal was actually one of the few Jews who were not fully *shomer Shabbos*, leading the children to tease him as "the Jew who cooks on Saturday." He left Bahrain in 1970. The cemetery's most recent burial was in 2001; since then, some of the few remaining Jews have chosen to be buried abroad.



In the natural pharmacy. Weighing out copper sulfate, the "*kuper vasser*" mentioned in the *Mishnah Berurah* and used to make kosher ink for a Torah

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Rabbi Benjamin M'Tudela, a twelfth-century Spanish Jew, spent more than a decade traveling around the Middle East and documenting Jewish communities there. He found that the Persian Gulf region was home to more than 5,000 Jews in several enclaves, mainly on Al-Qatif, a tiny island off Saudi Arabia, northwest of Bahrain, which was an important port at the time. These significant communities suggest the existence of additional Jews around the Gulf, including Bahrain, Oman, and elsewhere. Local Jewish and Muslim tradition says that the prophet Iyov is buried in Dofar, forty-five miles from the Omani port city of Salalah.

More recently, in the mid-nineteenth century, British lieutenant J. R. Wellsted documented the Jews of Muscat, the largest city in Oman, in his memoir *Travels in Arabia*, vol. 1. He mentions that some Iraqi Jews fled to the Gulf following rioting in Baghdad in 1828.

Rabbi M'Tudela also recounted that Persian Gulf Jews controlled the local pearl industry (a mainstay of island lore and income) until the mid-1800s, when a confluence of political treaties transformed the region into a preeminent trade center. That, in turn, boosted



Surprisingly enough, kosher products with *hashgachos*, even in Hebrew, grace the shelves of supermarkets in Bahrain. As a fabulously wealthy country, Bahrain imports much of its food from around the world

The community has not had a minyan in decades, and most of the community members who hold keys to the building were out of the country when we visited in the summer vacation period

Shopping Having exhausted the Jewish sites, we decided to experience some local color. Most of it is black and white, however, with men in white robes and women in black hijabs (head coverings that leave the face exposed) and jilbabs (full-body outer garments, similar to a full-length cloak). Many women also wear a niqab, a face covering with a narrow slit for the eyes. Some women go one step further and cover their eyes with a see-through screen that allows the wearer to see out but prevents others from seeing in.

Tzniyus in the Muslim is impressive, but a simple walk around the shopping districts in Bahrain illustrates how the Muslim concept of modesty differs from the Jewish ideal. It was strangely incongruous to see women covered head-to-toe in black but shopping for spectacular gowns and other stylish clothing. One husband, who had accompanied his wife on an afternoon shopping spree dressed in modern shorts and a polo shirt, explained the apparent contradiction. "When we hold our celebrations or parties, not only do we have separate seating for men and women, but we have separate venues! The women go out in public dressed in black, but as soon as they arrive at the women's-only location, they are free to dress however they want," he said.



A charity collection box for the "needy Palestinians in Gaza," located at the entrance of a large supermarket

Being the Middle East, the local outdoor market, known as the Manama Souk, was an obvious place to get a feel for the local culture. Like markets around the world, the Manama Souk provides insight into the Gemara's discussion of realia. A handful of natural medicine shops sell a variety of traditional plants, herbs, and minerals as well as leopard and snake skins and dried sea horses, which are used for the writing of amulets. One store offered remedies for every imaginable ailment, many of which are mentioned in traditional Jewish sources. For example, one could purchase kohl, a blue powder that has long been unavailable in the Western world but is mentioned three times in the Tanach as an eye colorant and in the Gemara as an eye treatment. The prophet Iyov named one of his daughters Keren-happuch (Iyov 42:14), "horn of the eyepaint," referring to a small shofar that held the powder, with which traditional Muslims still adorn themselves. Furthermore, the Mishnah (*Keilim* 13:2) discusses how much of a stick used to apply kohl to the eye must be broken so that it is no longer susceptible to *tumah*, ritual impurity.

Another traditional herb that's readily available is copper sulfate, which the *Mishnah Berurah* calls "*kupper vasser*" and which is used in producing *dyo*, the black ink used to write Torahs, tefillin, and mezuzos.

The pungent fragrance of incense also permeates the market air. To the Western nose, the smells are less than pleasing, but the locals consider them delightful.



A traditional natural pharmacy with many items mentioned in the Mishnah and Gemara, including animal pelts, on which one could write incantations and amulets

The Future: Full of Questions So ended our whirlwind stay of less than twenty-four hours in Bahrain, which required eight hours in the Cairo airport on the way in and seven hours in the Dubai airport in the middle of the night on the way out.

Our journey to Bahrain left us with mixed feelings. We enjoyed the gracious hospitality of our Jewish and non-Jewish hosts in Bahrain and appreciated the window into their world. At the same time, it is sad to witness the presence of Jews without much Torah Judaism. The few remaining Jews are now materially comfortable after several decades of turmoil. Current political conditions bode well for the community's stability and possibly even slight growth: A new immigrant is joining the community this summer, as another cousin of Khedouri's married a Canadian girl who is returning with him to Bahrain.

We enjoyed our brief visit to this fascinating Persian Gulf state and its small, proud Jewish community, and we wish these Jews well and hope they stay safe and connected to the Jewish People.

— additional reporting by Avi Friedman

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