

# “FORCED TO B

*Are some of the Palestinians really our brothers? A retired engineer-turned-researcher believes that many Israeli-Arab clans actually descend from Jews who were forced to convert under various Muslim rulers throughout the centuries. In some villages, Shabbos candles are still lit, and challah is separated from dough. Sound far-fetched? **Mishpacha**'s Aharon Granevich-Granot took a survey of Arab villages deep in the territory of the Palestinian Authority and listened to clan members declare, “We are Jews, and want to return to our brothers”*



# E MUSLIMS”

Photos: Ouria Tadmor

## Aharon Granevich-Granot

The scenery was breathtaking. We were surrounded by the striking, austere beauty of the Judean Desert, but we were nervous. We were in the heart of Palestinian territory—no Israeli security and not one soldier nearby in case of trouble.

“Perhaps we should forgo this whole trip,” I suggested to Tzvi Mesini, as we passed road signs warning us not to enter areas under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority.

But Mesini didn’t share my concerns. The dirt roads of Kfar Chozeba are as familiar to him as the streets of Rehovot, where he lives. For him, the warning sign against entering PA-controlled territory is no more than a piece of advice to be ignored. “We’ll find them very soon,” he promises me.

“There, look, that man gave me pita bread last time I was here,” Tzvi says, pointing out one of the residents. He waves in greeting. “They know us,” Tzvi assured us, trying to calm our nerves. In the distance, we could see a group of young men walking in our direction. *This is the end, I thought, they’re coming to stone us to death.* I imagined that if we had any luck at all, they might simply turn us over to the Israeli army, who’d interrogate us and demand to know how we got here and why.

But when the young men reached us, they simply said, “*Salaam aleikum,*” and extended their hands to shake ours. Tzvi explained to them that I was an *akbar chacham* (a wise man) *min el chakum* (from the Rabbinical court). My dark suit and hat deflected suspicions that I might be a reporter.

The young men had all the time in the world. “Come, come,” they said, inviting us to walk around the village with them. “We are also Jews, we are your brothers,” they told me. “We are the descendants of Bar Kochba,” they added with obvious pride. Soon enough, they were arguing over who would have the privilege of speaking with me first, to tell me how happy they were to regain their Jewish identity. There I was, so deep in the heart of Palestinian territory that Israeli soldiers don’t even patrol here. PLO flags fluttered above our heads, and signs had warned us that we were entering the

area at our own risk. But we were in another world—a world in which young Arabs who look like potential terrorists try to prove to us how much we have in common, and that they are actually our brothers.

**The Bar Kochba Clan** Our tour guide was Tzvi Mesini, a high-tech retiree. He left his job in order to devote his time to research the surprising theory that some of the Palestinian Arabs living in Israel today are in fact Jews forced to convert to Islam. He even wrote a book on the subject called *Yeuman ki Yesupar* (“Strange, But True”). Mesini began his research by making contact with the families and clans who remember strange customs performed in their homes, and he discovered that those customs had their origins in Judaism. He spent extensive time in many Arab villages, getting to know each clan and its leader. Some of them, he says, want to return to Judaism.

“The Jewish nation today essentially consists of two groups,” Mesini explains. “The first group was exiled from Eretz Yisrael, but preserved the Jewish religion and national identity for the generations to come. That group has finally made its way back to Eretz Yisrael.

“The second group remained in Eretz Yisrael, but the majority of the people who stayed here were forced to convert to Islam. As years passed, the second group lost much of its Jewish identity, and today is in nearly total spiritual exile. The name of Israel was changed from Yehuda to Palastina by the Roman Caesar, and thus the descendants of the forced converts of Eretz Yisrael are referred to today as Palestinians.

“After the intense suffering they experienced when they lost their Jewish identities, it is essential to ensure that they do not suffer any more. It is time for the People of Israel to reach their goal of helping every lost and exiled Jew come back home, by including the Palestinians in that effort,” says Mesini.

The members of the Chozeba clan claim that their family name was originally “Kozibah,” and that they were relatives of Bar Kochba. Until two generations ago, the clan lived in Kfar Chozeba, just south of Sa’ir in the southern Judean Desert. The homes and caves of Sa’ir are still used by the Chozeba clan when they farm their land



Security officer Miro Cohen (L) and clan members: "Mother made challah for Shabbos"

in the village. In Kfar El Minya, just south of Teko'a, there are more families from the Chozeba clan. One of them is the Amar family, who claim to be descended from Mugarbi Jews.

"Are you sure that you want to be Jews?" I asked the young people congregating around me. "Do you know what it means to observe all the commandments?"

But they were not easily dissuaded. "We don't need to convert, because we're already Jewish. Until now, we've been forced to say that we're Muslims, even though we all know that we are descended from Bar Kochba. But now it is time for us to return home, to Judaism."

"And how can we know that you never intermarried?"

"That's not a possibility." They answered my question in Arabic, and Miro Cohen, a security officer from Teko'a, who was with us, translated.

"In Arab clans, we are very strict about only marrying within the clan. If anyone ever married someone from a different clan, we all know about it. This is how we have lived for hundreds of years. Perhaps I cannot give you a 100-percent guarantee, but for the most part, there has been no intermarriage," the young men assured us, and then offered us coffee.

In some clans we visited, we were told about Jewish customs that were preserved for generations. But the Bar Kochba descendants disappointed us. The young people don't remember any customs at

## FORCED CONVERTS

In the year 1012, Caliph al-Hakim ordered everyone under his rule to convert to Islam or leave the Land of Israel. Many of his Christian subjects went into exile. But the Jews, who loved their land with a passion, preferred to stay in Israel and undergo conversion. Allegedly, approximately 90 percent of the residents of Israel became Muslims, but many continued to practice their true religion in private.

The decree was revoked in 1044 by a new caliph who came into power, and a quarter of the converts reverted to practicing their original religions. However, many chose to continue living as Muslims, or at least to appear as such, in order to enjoy the economic benefits granted only to those of the Islamic faith.

After the Crusaders overran Israel, the region fell into a spiritual and economic decline, and the population dwindled until it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1517.

From 1840 on, when Jews began to return en masse to the land of their forefathers, the leaders of the Jewish Agency pointedly ignored the large population of *anusim* — forced converts — already living in Eretz Yisrael. They were not ignored, however, by Arab powers from other countries. Their "sponsors" have succeeded in turning almost an entire nation of people, who could be our relatives, into our most dangerous enemies.

all. They've been practicing Muslims for generations, and all they have to back their claim that they are Jewish is the oral tradition that they are the descendants of Bar Kochba. We sat with the young men for an hour, said goodbye and moved on to our next stop on our rediscovery tour.

**The Elders Speak** At the entrance to his grocery store at the Zeif Junction south of Hebron, we were greeted by Muhammad Amsalem, who welcomed us warmly and didn't hesitate to tell us about his Jewish ancestors.

Muhammad is from the Amsalem clan from Chalot Al Maya, which boasts 11,000 members. He is not afraid of being interviewed or photographed. According to Muhammad, everyone knows that he and his clan are Jews, and refer to them openly as such.

"Our elders tell us," he begins, "that our forefathers came to this land during the Spanish Inquisition. They came here via Morocco, and the first place they settled was Ramle. Toward the end of the Mamluk rule, bandits burned their village, and they were forced to move to the Southern Hebron Hills area."

According to Muhammad, the Mamluks forced his ancestors to convert to Islam, and they have lived as practicing Muslims ever since. When they first learned that a Jewish community had been reestablished in Hebron, they decided to reveal their roots.

"My grandfather used to tell me how



they decided to approach one of the wise men of the Jewish community, to tell them their story and ask for help in returning to Judaism. A group of village elders presented themselves to the Jewish community, but the Jews saw that we had no knowledge of their religious practices, and refused to accept us. Our grandparents returned to their village, disappointed and dejected, and we have remained here living as Muslims ever since. If the Jewish community would be willing to receive us today, we would join them with great enthusiasm," Muhammad emphasizes.

Muhammad wouldn't let us leave until we agreed to drink something cold — we had to look for the kashrus symbol on the bottles, as he had no clue about "keeping kosher."

From there, we traveled a long way to another village in the southern end of Judea. We couldn't enter the village, as its residents are known to be particularly militant, but even getting close to the village was a challenge. While the area is especially tranquil and beautiful, with streams and hills creating a pastoral view, the air rich with the scent of

damp earth and crops ready for harvest, the tarred roads are narrow and winding, and demand extreme caution.

Eventually the tar road ended, and we took a sharp turn onto a dusty track that led to the outskirts of the village. There, on the roadside, waited "Badran." He didn't agree to be photographed, and didn't want his real name to appear in print. In his village, he was too high-profile. "We are Jews," was the first thing he said to us.

Badran told us that everyone in the village knew that there were Jews living among them, and these "Jews" were banned from living in the center of the village. "Your grandfather was a Jew, and you are also Jews," their neighbors tell them.

"After the Six Day War," Badran recounts, "the village council summoned my grandfather and a few other members of our clan. They said to him, 'The Jews have conquered this area. You are their friends, so go and convince them to connect the village to electricity.' The emissaries approached the military governor and presented their request, emphasizing that some of the village residents had Jewish origins. In their

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**Sheikh Muhammad Salem:  
no mixing meat and milk**

merit, our village was the first in Judea and Samaria to receive electricity."

Badran remembers many Jewish customs that were practiced by his clan. "My mother and grandmother used to go somewhere every Friday evening to light Shabbos candles," he tells us. "Eventually I made the connection that what they did was somehow linked to Judaism."

Badran also described mourning customs observed by his clan that are not observed by any other Arabs in Judea and Samaria. "When a close relative dies, we tear the edge of his clothing. Then we sit in mourning for seven days, like the Jews, and not just for three days, like the Muslims do. And I remember how my grandmother used to take a small piece of her dough and burn it. When we asked her what she was doing, she told us it brought blessing upon our home. Later, I learned that it was a form of separating challah."

Since 1996, Islamic spiritual leaders have been attempting to put an end to the mourning custom, by claiming that it is harmful to the deceased. That is perhaps less complicated than explaining that the custom in question is rooted in Judaism, for they don't want to encourage anyone to believe that he or she is descended from Jews.

The clan drew closer to Judaism quite unexpectedly. "One day, my uncle got sick," Badran tells us. "When he sensed his final hour was near, he called us all to his bedside and gave us a bundle that contained a cloth bag. Inside the bag were leather straps and a black box. He instructed us that whoever suffered from poor health or other problems should place the black box on his forehead,



Tzvi Mesini (R) listens as the Svarka clan trace their Jewish roots

and wrap the straps around his head, in order to improve his condition.”

Badran never really understood the significance of the small bundle of a box and straps, or why those objects had the power to heal, until he was invited one day to the home of Tzvi Mesini. There, he saw a full set of tefillin for the first time in his life, and was shaken to the core. “There is no better proof that we are Jews than our family’s tefillin,” says Badran.

“At the entrance to many homes I have seen an indentation and a scroll, on the left side of the door frame. After I saw the same thing in Jewish homes, I learned that the scrolls are mezuzos.” Now, Badran is doing everything in his power to return to Judaism, to the ways of his ancestors. “We were forced to abandon Judaism, and now we want to come back to it,” Badran states. Just then, the muezzin calls out that it is time for prayer, summoning the villagers to the local mosque.

**Muslim Wine** “The historian Yitzchak Ben Tzvi wrote about the existence of Jews among the residents of the Southern Hebron Hills,” Tzvi Mesini informs us, “and that until 150 years ago, they preserved Jewish tradition. Even later, they still did not eat camel meat (permitted to Muslims), and lit candles on Friday night and on Chanukah, without necessarily

knowing the source of the customs.

“The al-Makhamrah clan originated in Yemen. Makhamrah means ‘winemakers,’ but wine is forbidden to Muslims. Members of the clan live in the eastern section of Yattah in the Southern Hebron Hills, on the site of the Biblical town of Yuttah, and some live in Kfar Anzah, near Sanur in Samaria. Until today they maintain the custom of lighting Chanukah candles, and their neighbors call them Jews. One of the clan elders possesses a large silver menorah, which has been passed down from father to son for generations.”

And indeed, fifteen years ago I visited Kfar Yattah, together with Noam Arnon, who at the time was the director of Midreshet Hebron. We went to the home of an old man from the Makhamrah clan, who proudly showed us his family heirloom — a silver menorah that had been passed down through the generations. At that time I wrote an article about our visit to the village and our meeting with the clan leader. Two weeks later, I read that the Palestinian police had hung the old man by his feet and tortured him until he became a cripple. However, he survived the brutal treatment, and lived for many more years.

Another family in the Southern Hebron Hills owns two ancient pairs of tefillin. They are shared by a large number of villagers, who traditionally wear them in hopes of curing illness. In recent years, there are fewer

and fewer villagers who want to put on the tefillin, as the true significance of tefillin has been forgotten; and the two pairs they have are disintegrating.

Today, if a man has a headache, he will imitate the practice of donning tefillin by tying a piece of cloth around his forehead, and making the knot in front, to symbolize a tefillin’s black leather box. A large key is passed through the knot, and then turned until the strap of cloth squeezes the man’s head like a vise.

The villagers began using strips of cloth instead of leather for this custom, because the original leather tefillin straps were also wrapped in cloth, to protect them from wearing out. That practice led many to believe that the straps were made of cloth to begin with.

Another sign that the residents of Yattah have Jewish roots is the Star of David carved on the upper section of door frames, at the entrance to their homes. In recent years, many of the older village dwellings have been demolished. One old home still stands on its foundations, and the Star of David appears quite prominently on the door frame. With regard to newer homes, the Star of David is disguised by carving a six-petal flower, and then a banana alongside of it, as if to represent the Muslim symbol of a crescent. In other homes the Star of David flower had a five- or eight-petal flower beside it. All three designs can still be viewed on the arched doorways of Arab homes throughout the Southern Hebron Hills.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, Yattah was still a relatively small village, and the only Arab village in Israel in which

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The *akbar chacham* (Aharon Granot, left) and Tzvi Mesini with young members of the Chozeba clan



all its residents were allegedly of Jewish descent. But the passage of time, and fear of how new arrivals from east Jordan might react, led the villagers to gradually forget or abandon many of the Jewish customs they practiced. Still, the village elders continued without fail to gather at a tree growing out of a rock, south of the village, to light candles every Friday evening. That custom also disappeared in 1989, when the younger generation protested any demonstration of Judaism, in the wake of the first intifada.

Another gathering place in Yattah for Shabbos candlelighting was a stone house in a neighborhood called Amari. The home's door frame still bore a mezuzah, until the house was eventually destroyed in an effort to erase all signs of Judaism from the village. Though public candlelighting no longer occurs, some members of the Makhmrah clan still light Shabbos candles in the privacy of their homes.

At the site of Biblical Yuttah there are the ruins of a large shul, which lends credibility to the claim that Yattah's residents have Jewish roots. The Abu Aram family lives near the site of the ancient shul. When the village grew and expanded to the size of a town, most of the new construction occurred northeast of Yuttah. Muhammad Ali Abu Aram wrote a book about the Makhmrah clan's ancestry, to record the testimonies of the village elders, who claim they are descended from Jews.

Regarding the clan's name — which means "winemaker" — it is interesting to note that historically, none of the Arabs (many with Jewish origins) living in the area were ever devout followers of Islam. They could not cultivate grapevines, because that would have been a blatant transgression of Islamic law. But they all loved to drink wine, and that was an act easy enough to hide from the Muslim government.

And where did people who were supposed to be Muslims acquire wine? There were still Jews living in the region who openly practiced their religion, and they were permitted to raise grapes and produce wine. What did the local Muslims call those Jews, who were so kind to offer them wine and even secretly sell them the contraband beverage? Al-Makhmrah.

Three members of the Makhmrah clan, who live in Samoa, near Yattah (the site of Biblical Eshtamoa), have already converted to Judaism, or are in the process of doing so — despite the fact that they have been threatened and tortured by terrorists. One of the elder women in the family, who continues to light Shabbos candles and fast on Tisha B'Av, talks about the unbroken line of Jewish mothers in her family. She knows that all of the boys born into their family are also Jewish, according to halachah.

"I want you to understand why I am



Neighbors in the desert: "Everyone" knows the Svarka clan comes from Jews

so afraid," Badran tells us. "The fate of a member of the Makhmrah clan, who showed his silver Chanukah menorah to outsiders, was far worse than that of the converts. After his story was exposed in the press, the terrorists hung him by his feet for six weeks, and crippled him for life. Other Palestinians who discussed their Jewish roots with Israeli reporters, or who photographed signs of Jewish life in their villages, were severely punished by terrorists or by the Palestinian Authority. Even Bedouin who serve in the Israeli army are threatened by Muslim extremists, if they reveal their Jewish roots."

**Jew in a Mosque** We said goodbye to Badran, got back into our jeep, and drove on to the next stop on our tour. Near the chareidi settlement Maaleh Amos, in the middle of the seemingly endless desert, we searched for the campsite of the Svarka clan among the thorny, rocky landscape. They, too, claim to have Jewish origins. Suddenly, we saw the Bedouin encampment in all its glory, alongside houses that seemed too fancy to be built in the middle of nowhere. No one bothers to veer off the road and enter such an encampment, but we were intrepid.

We hadn't made an appointment — they are always at home. When they saw our jeep, a group of them came out and greeted us warmly. They know both Tzvi and Miro Cohen well. After a round of hugs and kisses on both cheeks, as Middle-Eastern etiquette dictates, they invited us inside. They don't mind being exposed to the world, for they are afraid of no one.

A shabby tent fashioned of torn blankets served as their home. The clan elder, Sheikh Muhammad Salem, ushered us into his humble abode. The interior of the tent was even less impressive than the outside. Threadbare rugs were spread on the bare ground, and there were a few tattered mattresses that served as sofas. It was clear from the stench of the mattresses that they doubled as beds for the family at night.

We were offered glasses of sweet tea, prepared by grinding seeds that give off a bitter smell when boiled. The residents of the tent went out of their way to receive us with honor, and to make us feel at home, despite their stark living conditions.

"I can remember my mother baking challah for Shabbos. I would steal a small piece from the batch on Thursday night," Sheikh Muhammad Salem tells us. "We never cooked meat and milk together. They were always separate. I knew those were Jewish customs. And we always said that we were Jews. Later, when I met Miro Cohen, I learned that all Jews observe those customs."

He still recalls how his father went every Friday afternoon to a hidden place among the trees that surrounded their encampment. One day, the young Muhammad couldn't control his curiosity, and decided to follow his father. He wanted to know what his father did every week, every Friday at the same time. "I followed him into the grove, and saw that there was nothing special about the place where he stopped. I asked my father why he came there, and he told me that a group of men would gather there to pray."

The sheikh continues, "Many members of our clan lived in Saga'iya, in Gaza, until 1967. But today we are scattered all over Israel. Everyone in the clan will tell you that, at least until 1967, we practiced many different Jewish customs."

Ovadia Yerushalami, originally from that same clan, today lives in Rechovot. "When I was a teenager, my grandfather summoned me and told me in the utmost secrecy that I am a Jew," he says. He used to live in Gaza, and went by a different name. Then he ran away to Rechovot, and under circumstances which cannot be revealed, he received permission to make Israel his permanent home. But before he managed to escape, the Palestinian authorities accused him of helping the Israelis. After he left Gaza, they hanged his oldest son.

The studies found that Jews and Palestinians share a similar gene pool, as do Jews of different ethnic groups

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Many Palestinian families bear names that have obvious Jewish connections. Here are just a few examples.

There is Elbaz, a family name connected to Moroccan Jewish immigrants. There is Khakhel (some of whose family members were convicted of terrorist activity), a name associated with Yemenite aliyah in the eleventh century. There is Abulafia, whose families descended from a rabbinic family in thirteenth-century Spain.

There is Alrazi (Algazi); the Almog family of Jenin who are known to be descended from Jews; the Cohen clan in Jordan, numbering about 4,000, who are known not to intermarry; the Ivri and the Canaani clan who live in Arabeh and Sakhnin in the Galil; and the Solomon and Tzadok families who live in Midiah in the Modiin region.

In Batir on the edge of Gush Etzion live the Pin-Nun (Bin-Nun) clan, who are known around the neighboring villages to be of Jewish origin. The Michael and Hazan families from the Christian village of Tarshikha near the Lebanese border also claim to be of Jewish descent.

"When I was a little boy, the other children teased me, saying my grandfather was a Jew and my father was a Jew. They used to curse me. As a child, I didn't know what a Jew was, or why they should curse me for being one."

Ovadia Yerushalmi's family members are not the only Jews living in Gaza. "Have you ever heard of the Abuchatzzeira family?" Ovadia asks us. "There are members of that family in Gaza," Ovadia informs us. "Not just one, but a whole clan of 3,000 members. They monopolize the Gaza fishing trade. They don't only bear the famous Jewish name," he continues, "but in their mosque they have hanging on the wall a picture of the famous Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzzeira."

"Did you see the picture with your own eyes?" I asked, incredulous.

"Not only did I personally see the picture, but the first time I ever heard of the famous rabbi was through that family, in Gaza. The family is extremely proud of their ancestor," says Ovadia.

**Jewish Genetics** We met with sixty-year-old Mor Mejali at the gas station in Kiryat Arba. Originally from Yattah, he lives today in Ramallah. He is confident that he has Jewish ancestors. "They have always

called us *'el Yahud,'*" he says. Even his name, Mor, is a Hebrew name. Nobody can explain how he got that name or where it came from. Mor also remembers Jewish customs from his childhood.

"Once a year, for a week," he tells us, "we didn't buy bread in the grocery store, and did not bake the pita that we usually eat. Instead, we baked a kind of flat bread without any yeast. I only recently learned about the Jewish holiday of Pesach. In addition," Mor continues, "our family never cut down an olive tree, under any circumstances. I also just found out that olives are among the seven species of the Land of Israel and that must be why we have always revered those trees." Mor Mejali also told us that his family performs a circumcision ceremony eight days after birth, in accordance with Jewish custom; and on the date of a person's death, the relatives go to his gravesite and light a memorial candle. "Whenever I hear about terror attacks against the Jews, I cry for the victims. I feel intense pain. I always ask my Arab brothers why they hurt the Jews — what the Jews had ever done to them."

Today, Mejali observes the commandments of both religions. He fasts during Ramadan, and also on Yom Kippur. He

celebrates Pesach and reads books on Judaism. He desires nothing more than to return to Judaism, to live the way his forefathers did, before they were forced to convert to Islam.

"The translation of al-Mejali," explains Tzvi Mesini, "is 'the exiled one.' Most probably, the head of the clan was sent into exile as punishment for unintentionally killing someone — that is the custom in Bedouin culture. The clan is well-known, as is their connection to Judaism, and is considered to be the oldest clan in Jordan. When the Jordanian prime minister signed a peace treaty with Israel, a member of the Mejali clan — Dr. Abed al-Salam Mejali, who is most likely also a Jew — was present."

A number of research studies on the genetic connection between Jews and Palestinians were conducted in 2000 and 2001. Led by Professor Ariella Openheim of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the studies found that Jews and Palestinians share a similar gene pool, as do Jews of different ethnic groups. The researchers discovered that 82 percent of the Arabs who came from the western side of the Jordan River (commonly referred to as "Israeli Arabs") are very close relatives of the Jews, based on their genetic makeup.

Surprisingly, the similarity between the gene pools of Palestinians and Ashkenazic Jews is greater than the similarity between Palestinians and other Arab nationalities, according to the research.

Another study has published preliminary findings indicating that the Palestinians who historically lived in the hills are closer relatives to us than those who lived along the coast. ■