The last time I saw Kabul

by **Jack Goldfarb**
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The last time I saw Kabul, an air of uneasy foreboding hung over the sullen Afghan capital. The year was 1979. Fear of a Russian invasion loomed from the north, beyond the bulwark of snowy mountains that defend the city. The Soviets were poised to march in the footsteps of Alexander, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, and other fabled warriors who had assaulted this rugged land.

As history played out, the Soviets' decade-long military efforts failed dismally. In '79, I was one of a handful of remnant guests lodged in Kabul's luxurious hilltop Inter-Continental Hotel. The vast six-story establishment was virtually deserted, its plush corridors and lobby eerily silent. But in the bustling streets below it was still business as usual. Along the lengthy stretch of Jadeh Maywand, shoppers haggled over everything from refrigerators and car parts to textiles and ballpoints while roaming cigarette hawkers, lottery-ticket sellers, and orange peddlers huckstered on the crowded sidewalks. In motley Chicken Street, bargain hunters browsed through musty carpets, brass samovars, leather goods, and antiques both real and fabricated. And on nearby Charshi Torabazein Street, in a squat two-story building, members of the Kabul Jewish community congregated in their modest synagogue for afternoon prayers. Kabul's closely-knit 150 Jews abided by their Orthodox rituals with a daily minyan, a handsomely tiled *mikva* and strict Sabbath observance.

I recall one Jewish wife urging her husband not to wear his acrylic sweater on the Sabbath because it "created static electricity."

Most families made their own wine and baked their own Shabbat naan bread. At Passover, families conducted their seders seated on the floor in a circle, partaking of their homemade matza prepared in freshly kashered clay ovens.

Benjamin of Tudela, that peripatetic observer of the 12th-century Jewish world, recorded that he had been told 80,000 Jews were living in the ancient Afghan city of Ghazni. Other medieval sources describe a flourishing Jewish community in the city of Balkh astride the India-to-Europe caravan trade route. Little more is known of Afghan Jews until the mid-19th century, when thousands seeking escape from forced conversions in the Meshed region of Persia found refuge in Afghanistan.

By the century's end the Jewish population of Afghanistan numbered 40,000. Settled mainly in the cities of Kabul, Heart, and Ghazni, they spoke a Judeo-Persian dialect, worked mostly as craftsmen or traders in carpets, skins, and antiquities, and were known for composing lyrical religious poetry.

Izhak Levi and Zevulon Simantov are Afghanistan's only remaining Jews.

Over the years the community gradually dwindled through emigration. When 5,000 left to settle in Israel in the late 1940s, others departed for India and London. The decline continued until only a core of 150 remained at the time of the Soviet invasion.

Today, only two Jews are left in the country: Izhak Levi and Zevulon Simantov. Levi, a hardy octogenarian, the synagogue's *shamash* caretaker, said he felt the responsibility to look after the sole Torah remaining in the sacred ark. When a newspaper story a few years ago quoted Levi as planning to emigrate, another Afghan Jew, Zevulon Simantov, living in Israel, who had returned to Kabul to restore the Jewish cemetery, offered to take the holy scroll back to Israel with him.

A quarrel developed between the two men. The Taliban stepped in, took possession of the Torah, and jailed both Levi and Simantov. Later they were released.

The Torah was last known to be in the custody of a Taliban government ministry. Levi and Simantov, still at odds with each other, were said to be residing in the dilapidated synagogue, where their unresolved squabble kept them at opposite ends of the building. After Kabul was liberated from the Taliban, word came through that Levi and Simantov are in good condition.

Some biblical scholars believe remnants of the 10 Lost Tribes of Israel, exiled by the Assyrians 2,700 years ago, are the ancestors of today's Afghan tribes, particularly the Pashtun. They cite Pashtun tribal names and their Old Testament equivalents like Rabani (Reuven), Ephridi (Ephraim), Asheri (Asher), and Jaji (Gad). The scholars point to the Pashtun customs of men wearing fringed prayer shawls and hair ringlets, weddings under huppa-like canopies and circumcisions for eight-day-old sons. On *erev* Shabbat, wine is consumed, a practice forbidden in Islam.

A story is told of a meeting of the Afghan king with a member of the Jewish community at which the monarch asked his Jewish subject if he knew from which tribe of Israel he descended. The Jew said he was not certain. Whereupon the king, claiming descent from the tribe of Benjamin, recited his own genealogy. He traced his ancestry back to Pithon, son of Micah, son of Jonathan, son of Saul, the first king of Israel. (*I Chronicles* 9:41)

Generally, tolerance and respect for the Jews has been a tradition in Afghanistan. King Zahir Shah, who is expected to return soon from exile in Rome, is remembered for his benign concern for his Jewish citizens during Israel's Six Day War. At the time, he ordered each Jewish house to be safeguarded by a soldier.

Afghan Jews also recall how, after the king was injured in a car accident, a delegation of Jews visited him in the palace to offer a customary gift of sheep and bread loaves for a sacrifice to speed his recovery. The king responded by saying he believed his life had been spared because his loyal Jewish subjects prayed so devoutly for him in the synagogue every Saturday.

As Zahir Shah, now 87, prepares to return to his native land, in all likelihood there will be no Jews left to recite the special synagogue prayers for his prosperity and well-being. Levi and Simantov have said they intend to leave. Both have wives and children in Israel, although Levi has not seen his family in 20 years. Today, the Afghan Jews, still retaining their close ties and pious traditions, can be found alive and well in thriving communities in Israel, Queens, Milan, and London. ■

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