

HERE'S *my* STORY

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REBUILDING AFGHANISTAN

MR. YOSEF MAOZ

I was born in 1937, in the city of Herat, Afghanistan, to the Mullah Ezra family. The Jewish community in Afghanistan is one of the world's most ancient, and living there gave us a keen sense of our Judaism. The Jews of Herat all resided in the same neighborhood, in enclosed courtyards, each containing several homes. Although there were business ties between the Jews and our Muslim neighbors, especially ahead of the Jewish holidays — vendors would come on their donkeys to our area bearing fruit, vegetables, fish and chickens before every Shabbat and festival — we lived apart from our non-Jewish surroundings.

In the larger courtyards, people raised livestock, providing milk and kosher meat. There were several kosher slaughterers, *shochtim*, in the community, and once the meat was brought home, the women — who were all experts when it came to removing any forbidden fats or nerves — would complete the koshering process.

The synagogues, four in all, were also in enclosed courtyards. Two such courtyards contained two adjoining synagogues, one of which would serve the younger people, along with a few in-ground *mikvaot*.

Behind each synagogue there was a study hall, which also served as a school of sorts. As a child, I studied Torah in the study hall of Rabbi Asher Garji. We would end up spending the entire day there: In the morning, we came to pray in the synagogue, we'd have breakfast at home, and then return to the study hall. At lunchtime, we returned to our homes, which were nearby, and then went back again to learn until the evening.

For the most part, the Jews made their living as merchants and shopkeepers. Our family also owned a store in Obe, but this town had been almost completely emptied of its Jewish inhabitants. A not insignificant portion of Afghan Jewry emigrated to the Land of Israel at the turn of the century, and then, after the founding of the State, the majority of those who still remained left as well. Although relations with our Muslim neighbors were mostly calm, I



Yosef Maoz shortly after arriving in the United States, standing next to Gavriel Ahron who was also a member of the delegation that met the Rebbe.

do remember how, after Israel's Sinai Campaign in 1956, things became more tense.

Some of the extremists in Herat wanted to attack the Jews, but the government sent police straight away to protect our homes. On Fridays, young Muslim men would come in from the religious schools in the surrounding towns, to pray in the large mosque in Herat. We called them *taleban* (the word means religious students) and they could be hot-headed, but one of their leaders, or *kadis*, would come and speak with my father. On that Friday after the Sinai Campaign, he came to assure my father. "You don't have to be afraid. Nobody will do anything to you," he said. Still, I came to understand that there was no future for Jews in Afghanistan.

At first, I moved to Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan, where there was a larger Jewish community. After working there for a few years, I was asked by the Abraham brothers, Meir and Yehuda, who were senior figures in the Afghan

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**EVENTS. IDEAS.
PERSONALITIES.**

Marking 70 years from the anniversary of the Rebbe's leadership, each week, JEM will be focusing on one event, idea or personality in the Rebbe's life.



continued from reverse

Jewish community in New York, to come and work in their jewelry business.

When I informed my parents of my plans to emigrate, my mother expressed her desire to leave with me, and move to Israel. My brothers and sister also joined in, while my father stayed behind to put his affairs in order before he too would join the family. We traveled to Israel by way of Iran, arriving towards the end of the summer of 1962.

After a month or so, I carried on to the United States, to work with the Abraham brothers. With so many Afghan Jews having immigrated to the US, there was a significant community in New York. Some of them had a relationship with the Rebbe, so from time to time, I would come to the *farbrengens* held in the large synagogue on 770 Eastern Parkway. I wasn't able to understand much of the Rebbe's talks, which were in Yiddish, but the scenes and the atmosphere that prevailed in that place were something else.

One day in 1964, Rabbi Shmuel Pesach Bogomilsky approached the heads of the Afghan emigre community, and invited them to meet with the Rebbe.

There's a backstory to this. A year earlier, Rabbi Bogomilsky was sent by Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch, Chabad's central educational arm, on a tour of a long list of Jewish communities in Europe, Africa and Asia, which included a visit to Afghanistan. After delivering a report to the Rebbe on what he had seen there, the Rebbe asked him to arrange a meeting with the leaders of the local emigre community. That was how we — the Abraham brothers, Shlomo Gat, Gavriel Ahron, and myself — came to visit the Rebbe. Although I was younger than any of them, they decided to include me in the contingent, seeing as I had just recently arrived from Afghanistan and was more familiar with what was happening on the ground.

As I recall it, the first thing that impressed me about the Rebbe's office was the simple style that characterized the room, and the way the walls on every side were simply filled with books — and of course, seeing the Rebbe up close. Being in his presence made your head spin; it was something I had never experienced in my life.

The Rebbe asked each of the participants when they had arrived and what they did here, before inquiring more generally about the Afghan diaspora in the United States, the number of Jews left behind, and the state of Judaism there. He related that his emissary, Rabbi Bogomilsky, had reported that there weren't any official synagogues in regular operation, and that community members had been holding impromptu prayers in a private home. The city's ritual bath, or *mikveh*, was also revealed to have been compromised by some serious Halachic issues. The Rebbe urged the community heads to fix those issues, and also to have a proper synagogue built — somewhere prominent enough for people to be able to see it and know what it was.

In honor of the Rebbe's 120th birthday

By Anonymous

You can help us record more testimonies by dedicating future editions of *Here's My Story*

"But everyone has already left," they objected. "No one is there anymore! Why invest in religious buildings if no one will use them?"

The Rebbe patiently explained that, in addition to the few local Jews who still remained, tourists, diplomats and businessmen were still coming. It was important for there to be a conspicuous central synagogue, as well as a kosher *mikveh*, so that visitors to the city would know of their existence.

Following the meeting, the participants indeed took care to build a beautiful synagogue and a kosher *mikveh* in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. It was quite obvious to me that this was on the Rebbe's account, for having taken pains to send a special emissary to visit Afghanistan. Who even remembered Afghanistan, or thought about the Jews there? But the Rebbe cared for the Jews who lived in Afghanistan and even for those who might visit it.

Years later, my business dealings sent me wandering throughout the world: India, Thailand, Brazil and elsewhere. In each of those places, I met the Rebbe's emissaries. They take care of everyone, and the work that they do literally saves lives. All of this is in the merit of the Rebbe.

I still clearly remember the sight of the Rebbe's holy face, and every time I see his picture, I feel a twinge of pain in my heart, as I think of how much we are missing him.

Mr. Yosef Maoz is a diamond dealer who resides in Shaarei Tikvah, Israel. He was interviewed in his home in December of 2014.

This week in....

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחי

> **5731-1971**, since Rebbetzin Nechama Dina, the wife of the Previous Rebbe, had passed away three months earlier, the Rebbe began to hold the *seder* in the privacy of his own home together with his wife, Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, instead of in 770 in the presence of guests and spectators. As a result, the late-night *farbrengens* that used to take place after the *seder* were also discontinued. Instead, the Rebbe expounded on the *haggadah* at a subsequent Shabbat-afternoon *farbrengen*.¹
15 Nissan

1. *Sichot Kodesh* vol 2 page 102

MY ENCOUNTER
with the **REBBE**

While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.

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