

נשים *Nashim*

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH WOMEN'S STUDIES & GENDER ISSUES







TO THE LAND OF SABA AND BACK AGAIN

I hope the photographs taken on my amazing journeys to Yemen reveal something about spiritual and cultural traditions preserved, as well as the unspeakable reality of Jewish-Yemeni women's lives there, heretofore, unseen and unknown to me, a sheltered middle-class woman from Detroit, Michigan.

As much as I sought to broaden my perspective, without my camera, I never could have fully understood, imagined, or properly share my mythical journey to make women's voices heard.

Starting out in Israel, I was drawn to Jewish-Yemeni women's history, by raconteur, Zipporah Greenfield, of blessed memory, who dramatized her foremother's stories in song.

She spoke of dreams from a supernatural past, disclosing sacred feminist rituals that might otherwise have been forgotten. Her tales were filled with awe and wonder, and the fortitude of Jewish-Yemeni women's renewal of spirit.

Walking in the footsteps of her mother, her source of strength, Zipporah found the vision to turn Jewish-Yemeni-Israeli women's complicated history into the blessing it deserves. As well as the courage to reclaim the stories of powerful Jewish-Yemeni women heroines in a culturally rich history, where anything is possible.

Our favored matriarch, the Queen of Sheba, pillar of, not only the Yemeni-Jewish women's story, but the Ethiopian-Jewish women's, too, still stands, with the pillars of her Temple sanctuary, among the ruins, in Marib, Yemen. Marib is the capital of the ancient kingdom of Saba, dating back to pre-Islamic times. The standing pillars remind us that the Queen of Sheba's empire ruled the world from her base in Yemen. Her sovereignty, wisdom and humanity; her strong desire to adjudicate peace over war, is credited in both Arab and Jewish literature, with the Qu'ran noting, the Hoopoe bird transported the Queen of

Sheba's mighty throne, known for its enhancement of spiritual powers, to King Solomon's Temple in Israel (another story).

According to varied Internet sources: many artistic and cultural developments, customary in Yemen today, are derivational from the Sheba Kingdom, as well as from early Islam. Music and dance, too, are filled with influences from these times, the origins of which can be traced back to Yemenite Jews, proud of their pre-Islamic history,



The standing pillars of the Queen of Sheba's Temple Sanctuary in Marib

Zipporah's parents came to Israel in the early twentieth century. Her father was a visionary and scholar, her mother a ceremonial healer and poet, who arrived with verses of priestesses rooted in memory and upon her lips.

It goes without saying that, Zipporah's mother was a beauty. As her fame spread, aspects of her features aroused the passion of men in villages near and far, eliciting their desire to acquire her. In addition, the local sheik took the opportunity to benefit financially. So he set a high bride price, meaning potential spouses would have to work years, to be able to afford

her. However, after a mere 150 days, our hero, Zipporah's father, set her mother free. Together they bore 7 daughters.

I photographed Zipporah's mother as an elder, steeped in old-world invocations. Every night, after her beloved husband, a powerful personality, of blessed memory, left this world she would light two Yahrzeit (memorial candles), called the *ner shoma*, the light of beauty, seeking divine intervention for her family's relief from all life's troubles.

"Mother speaks with candles, as if she brings down the soul of her husband to this world," explains Zipporah, whose father vowed, "I will always be with you. I will pray for you from my grave. And, so, every night Zipporah's mother reminds him, remember you promised me that, even from your grave, you would support this house."

All her children, including her sons-in-laws, appreciated their mother's apostrophic powers, using rituals in a personal way to influence multiple worlds.

Women in Yemen did not attend school. A woman's life was the same from when she was born, until she died. But the wisdom she gained was because life taught her how to do everything. All that she knows, she learned from herself.

It was the seventh year that all seven sisters had been taking turns caring for their mother. An old age home was out of the question, not to be surrounded by her family, would have been their mother's end.

THE ISSUE OF MULTIPLE WIVES



In Yemen and in Torah, a man is permitted to marry more than one wife, as evidenced in the marriages of patriarch's Abraham and Jacob; King David and King Solomon, all of who were polymorphous. So was the Yemeni-Jew with two wives, pictured above, whose home I visited in Sa'dah

Senior editor at Chabad.org, author Tzvi Freeman, affirms in his article, *Why does the Torah Allow Polygamy*, In Jewish thought, polygamy is not, and never was, considered an ideal state.

Additionally, Freeman points out that in biblical texts polygamy results in strife between competing wives. Even the verse, in which the Torah sanctions polygamy, is framed within a terrible concept: If a man will have two wives, one beloved and the other hated ...

It wasn't until the 11th Century that, the light of the Diaspora, Rabbi Judah Gershom, from Metz, Germany, famed as an authority on Jewish law, decided that a man could only marry one wife. His ruling was codified into rabbinic law and broadcast worldwide.

Sadly, Rabbi Gershom's unprecedented judgment was binding only to Ashkenazi men. Jewish-Yemeni men were not obligated to follow this law, as they were aligned with authorities in Spain and Iraq (Babylon). Centuries later, when I was in Yemen, Jewish-Yemeni-husbands were still married to multiple wives.

It was in this fairytale setting, nearby the *Suq al-yahud* (Jewish market) in the ancient city of Sa'dah, where the story of Jewish women beyond the veil was of interest only to me, no one seemed to notice my foreign presence. I had hoped to meet Jewish women buying jewelry in the open-air shops of the last Jewish silversmiths, trading highly valued necklaces, bracelets, and rings in the mountainous highlands of the South Arabian Peninsula.

Instead, the craftsmen were chanting Torah passages from hallowed books held upside down and young boys were being taught to memorize the same in proper Yemenite-Aramaic pronunciation. Girls were not taught to read, or to recite, or to memorize, but as their fathers, brothers, husbands, and son's prayed aloud three times a day, they got to learn by osmosis.

I wondered about the infighting between rival wives. Did the husband provide equally for both? Did he favor one wife over the other?

In a sudden realization of prophetic dreams come true, an apparition appeared to me, saying, in my mind's eye, "Under the veil I am the most beautiful and sought after woman in all of Yemen."

Before me stood the loveliest of veiled women wearing the traditional *niqab*, the popular veil, worn by Jewish-Yemeni women, with only her eyes uncovered, a *jilbaba*, loose fitting ankle length caftan, thousands of years old, finished off with long black gloves, so as not to accidentally touch the hand of an unrelated man.

Here was the woman to whom I would owe the destiny of my adventure. She was darkness so bright; her spirit blinded me. As this charming vision enfolded my hands into hers, I suddenly felt safe. As if she had been awaiting my arrival. She knew I was Jewish and agreed to my purpose. "You will be my very, very eyes," she whispered.

A Jewish woman is not obligated to cover her face, even in Yemen, except at her wedding. Nevertheless, Jewish-Yemeni women in the cities of Sana'a and Sa'dah are more inclined to adhere to these restrictions. In remote villages, Jewish-Yemeni women have more options. The veil in Yemen is customary among Arab women. Girls begin wearing veils during their teenage years. The Qu'ran advises women accordingly, to dress modestly, avoid the male gaze, give careful thought to the paths of your feet, be steadfast in all your ways and above all guard your heart - for everything you do flows from it (*Proverbs 23-27*).

Under Islamic law, Jews were assigned protected status as *dhimmis* (second-class citizens), meaning, Jews were allowed to practice their centuries-old traditions and religious beliefs, but were not permitted to wear Yemeni *janbiyas*, short curved daggers with sterling silver handles, worn by Yemeni men, or to build houses taller than those of Yemeni origin.

At first look, to me, Jewish homes appeared to be sundried brick sandcastles. Diminished, yet multi-storied, usually three floors, with scenic views and flat rooftops serving also as watchtowers, sleeping alcoves, a safe outdoor space to hang laundry, and a shared area for all those living together in an extended family to socialize.

The top floor, *mafraj* (sitting room) is the biggest room in the house and often doubles as a synagogue, with an Ark, housing Torah Scrolls, dug into the wall. Shoes are removed before entering. Each family unit had its own living quarters. On the ground floor of hand-hewn stone, are stables, granaries, storerooms and a kitchen.

I was invited to the genteel home of two extraordinary wives, married to one worthy husband, who was, of course, the head of the family and sole decision maker. The wives ran the household, raised the children, and took full time care of their mother-in-law. Both wore head coverings with added scarves and pretty dresses, each denoted a particular taste in color and style. Both had babies. The younger had two and was pregnant again.

We do all our chores together - well almost - they giggled - discussing the impact their peculiar friendship had upon the pitiless demands and hated drudgery of never ending housework, no woman could possibly do by herself.



One wife cuts; the other chops. Together they feed the cows (sounds like *Fiddler On The Roof*), balance buckets on their heads, having fetched water from the well to wash dishes and clothes and bathe their mother-in-law.

One then plucks chickens; the other gathers dried sticks from the hillside, to build a fire in the *diama* (round clay oven). The kitchen is also a communal space where women socialize while cooking. After the soup is made, the chickens boiled, pita baked, and their husband fed, the wives dine in a room apart with their mother-in-law, corroborating their low social self-esteem and cultural status, even at home.





After dinner is served, the women await their beloved husband's decision in the doorway of the sitting room. Which wife will he choose to sleep with tonight? The older wife confided that, their husband prefers the younger wife. In addition, she admitted she was jealous, and feared the outcome of one wife birthing more children than the other. Traditionally, a wife's social status depends upon how many children she has - especially if they are boys.

I slept on the floor in the bedroom of the wife not chosen. She was really adorable with a great sense of humor about her situation, in spite of her jealousy. She couldn't sleep, she said, thinking about her husband with his young wife. I couldn't sleep either in this surreal setting without electricity, running water, indoor plumbing, and a Jewish husband sleeping with his other wife. As we sneaked down the stairs, headed into the moonlight, we passed the master bedroom. The older wife pressed her ear to the door and we both cracked up laughing. We didn't stop. We sat outside bursting with laughter the whole night.

Indeed, Rabbi Judah Gershom had been a prophet. Here was a man who understood that two women living in the same house creates jealousy and that this scenario would not work in modern times. It turns out though, the Rabbi learned from his own mistake. Once he discovered his first wife to be barren, he added another wife, who bore him a child, and a lot of troubles were caused by this.

Third trip to Yemen



I was refused permission to travel. NO! The official in charge claimed it was too dangerous, because: Haydan had been off limits for centuries. No one has been permitted to travel there. No one else wants to go there, only me. Jews live among Arabs. Violent feuds between tribes erupt. Men shoot aimlessly at one another in the streets.

All that money spent, time wasted, dreams vanquished. Do I really want to go there? I would go, but how to make it happen?

God provides. I walked a group of Jewish men from the United States, with Haydan listed on their travel documents. And, so, we were given a driver with a four-wheel-drive-pickup truck that could easily be turned into an improvised military vehicle, and a rifle-bearing escort. The men sat in an open cargo bed. I sat alone inside the cab with the driver.

Two following two paragraphs were found while researching Haydan on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemenite_Jews

1. In northern Yemen, close to the border with Saudi Arabia, Jewish communities were scattered among remote towns and villages. Many of the Jewish men were silversmiths. The silver jewelry they

manufactured used filigree and granulation techniques that differed in style and motifs from silver ornaments made by Jewish silversmiths in other parts of Yemen

2. Nestled in the mountains, Haydan is the largest town in the far northern districts of Yemen. Access is obtained by travelling overland in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. It takes hours to reach, due to a treacherous terrain, and was once home to a large Jewish community.

Driving up risky eroded cliffs and isolated rock formations, ancient superficial deposits on the earth's surface, I felt like an astronaut, at the ready, for take off to a magical stratosphere. I gasped as I pondered, if the men accompanying me chose to do so, they could drop me off on a hill and leave me there. Who would know, or care? Nobody, except, thank God, my then-husband Lenny.

God tells us in Isaiah 41:13, "For I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you." Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

I was sorry for my mother. She worries about me on such trips. It wasn't that long ago, in my first marriage, she was at peace with my being afraid to walk out the door alone, like she was. I wasn't looking to transcend ordinary human knowledge, quite the opposite. My goal is to simplify, to reconcile Jewish women's history with faith, by documenting the same rituals worldwide, especially in countries where Judaism is not the state religion. Like in Yemen, where Islam prevails.

When we arrived at the isolated Haydan, I was surprised to see Jewish women and girls in less restrictive dress. Here they do not wear the old-fashioned *gargush*, traditional Jewish-Yemeni headdress, or hood, worn in other distant towns, nor do they cover their faces in a *niqab*, like other Jewish women, Instead they wear headscarves, resembling *hijabs*, made from soft, stretchy print fabrics



Unique to them is a green makeup, made from *Khaddab* a liquid extracted from plants, used exclusively by Jewish-Yemeni women to decorate their face and the palms of their hands. The liquid is applied on an everyday basis, especially to magnify the eyes, and on the palms of hands for protection, much like henna. But, even more so than beauty, its fragrance, much like the biblical mandrakes, has magical and medicinal properties, said to make a woman more attractive, and to entice men.



A delightful woman, her face decorated with green dots, invited me to accompany her home. Her heartwarming presence was cheerful and uplifting. Beauty, she said, is prized in Haydan. And claimed that, I needed a makeover to better fit in. She wrapped my head in scarves, overlaid fashionable Yemeni clothing atop mine, and carefully applied, not much, liquid green makeup to my hands and eyelids, then, invited me to join her at an event to honor the bride.

The women weren't welcoming. No one smiled at me. The men, those from the United States and Yemen, arrived together. No photographs were allowed, they said, as they always do. Not tonight. Not at the wedding. Why do I want to photograph Jewish-Yemeni women anyway? Was I a spy? A woman should not be allowed to travel alone. I should photograph the men (as if they would let me), and, blah blah. The men I travelled with were quick to undermine me, as well, to no surprise. Even though their chauvinistic attitude was pervasive, these guys were overbearing to the point where, I summoned our guard to protect me. He stood up, pointed his sniper rifle at the crowd, rounded up the hotshot men, whisked them away, locked them in a room, and I got to photograph for the rest of the trip, but, not without having to purchase plenty of necklaces and bracelets and rings from each and every one of the silversmiths. Thank God there were only a few who had not yet emigrated. I spent hundreds of dollars, but, truth be told, in addition to unforgettable memories and awesome photographs, I now have a rare collection of fabulous silver jewelry, made by the Jewish silversmiths of Haydan.



Henna ceremony, mother and sister dressing the bride in scarves and overlaid clothing

A Jewish wedding in Yemen is a spiritual blessing, sacred and holy, and always arranged, even though men are permitted to marry four different wives. The Bride and groom do not see each other before their wedding night. Sometimes they may not even have met. If a girl is born under a lucky star, the life partner her parents choose for her will be a good match. However, if she is not attracted to him, and doesn't like him, she has no choice, but to marry him. Like other Jewish girls before her, a Jewish-Yemeni must obey her parents.



It is obligatory for the prospective groom to bestow a wondrous *sandook* (bridal chest), full of gifts, upon his fiancée. The chest is in addition to the bride price, paid by the groom, or his father, to the bride's family. Exciting as this bequest may be, it is also a symbolic contract, indicative of a man's responsibility to increase his wife's wealth in marriage; his promise that she will never be left without worth, even when she is surprised to hear (God forbid) that she is no longer lusted for and that her husband has acquired another wife.

This pre-nuptial custom is a legal and moral commitment regarding a man's financial accountability to his wife. But a husband is more than a benefactor, the physical and emotional aspects of their union also requires his commitment to proper conduct. Especially, if his wife,

really too young to marry, is taken from her childhood home to the house of a man she doesn't know, and at whose pleasure she will serve.

Back in the day, not so long ago, "bridal chests" were filled with kilos of extravagant silver necklaces, trimmed with ornamental flourishes and lacy filigrees, skillfully applied by Jewish-Yemeni silversmiths in Haydan, whose craftsmanship ranked them among the community's spiritual elite. The necklaces always bedazzled the bride and she felt beautiful and confident wearing them.

In Haydan, when I was there, the "bridal chest" was a black trunk, with a painted, hand-sewn quilt on top. The trunk was full to the brim with gifts, enough for the bride, her mother, her sisters, and all the women in her extended family. Included, but not as plentiful as in the good old days, was the coveted silver jewels, along with new eye-catching accessories, bed and table linens, an assortment of silk and cotton chiffon headscarves, rare coins, traditional and fashionable dresses, frankincense, polished amber, and more.

During the modest henna ceremony, and the formal dressing of the bride, by her sister and mother, the trunk delivery was made. The bride's friends, seated on wooden pallets, lining the wall, get up to dance the *Nissawai*, a quirky female dance, in which the young women's eyes look downward, then upward, and their feet move in tiny, incremental steps, the way women's feet do when they dance in the presence of God.

The bride is covered in a plentitude of layers: fancy under dresses, overlaid with a black silk brocade, high waist and belted, full pleated skirt; headscarves, consist of multiple layers of cotton scarves, overlaid with a sheer silk white chiffon scarf, topped in a long headdress, made from the same black silk brocade as the skirt.

Dayenu, if only it were enough; Her face, too, was shielded first in half veils; overlaid with two thick black veils. In all, there was a subtle beauty to the underlying *sharsaf*, the black silk brocade skirt, matching cape, headdress and veil ensemble, and fashionable at Jewish-Yemeni weddings in North Yemen. Prior to her walk down the aisle, the bride's wedding veil is again overlaid in a solid black cloth.



The super veiled bride, is escorted down the aisle by her mother and sisters and remains hidden from view throughout the ceremony, behind a black chiffon *Mechitza* (partition) that separates women from men, but as seen in this photograph is simply another oversized scarf, held up by male attendants, presumably relatives.

Guests eagerly wait for the memorable moment, the prearranged *Kiddushin*, (marriage ceremony). Suspended on a mountaintop, on the other side of the moon, the bride, unseen at her own wedding, leads to mixed emotions, even if one could see the bridal outline beyond the scarf.

I had met her ahead of time, before her covering was completed. The crowd, too, knew her well. We were all rooting for this precious, sweet, brave, courageous, beautiful, and very good girl, willing to undergo this pageantry, for the sake of heaven, because, in spite of everyone's insistence, the Talmud specifies that a woman can be acquired only with her consent, and not without it. *Kiddushin 2a-b*.

But even after the scarf was drawn aside, to a sigh of relief, and the veiled bride made visible, her outer veils would not yet be lifted, not until the groom paid the money owed, symbolized by a tiny olive, which she must eat, as confirmation. Fair or not, her mother keeps the money. After the olive is consumed and the money paid, the prayer of sanctification over the wine takes place, and the bride's veil is partially raised, in this holy of holiest moments, to consecrate her marriage in God's name, she drinks from the *Kiddush* cup (wine glass), handed over by her betrothed.



the sheer curtain is drawn back for the Kiddushin



olive on plate



drinking the wine

FLORENCE EZEKIEL NADIRA



Primilla, on whose shoulders Nadira stood.



Nadira surrounded by Indian Gods, in front of the Shviti

In 1952, producer and director, Mehboob Khan, was on the lookout for the "right" woman to play Princess Rajeshwari 'Raj in his forthcoming film *Aan*, (*Savage Princess*) when he accidentally overheard Nadira conversing in Hindustani, a mix of the Urdu, Hindi and Arabic languages, as spoken in his films, while attending a wedding in the Jewish-Iraqi community. It was in this way that he discovered Nadira, who would become a Jewish-Indian film star, "before she even knew what the industry was about," she says.

The rest is history. A dream come true, but not without heartaches. Thus, she made her debut in Khan's film, which also became the highest grossing, first worldwide release of a full feature color film, made in India.

As the child of an Orthodox Jewish family, starring in movies was inconsistent with Nadira's identity. Her mother warned that by acting in risqué roles and publicly wearing a sari and bindi, the mark of a Hindu, between her eyebrows, no Jewish man would ever marry her. None did.

Nadira starred in 60 films, all box office blockbusters. But, it was in the 1955 film, *Shree 420*, directed and produced by Indian heartthrob Raj Kapoor, that Nadira was first typecast as the sultry temptress Maya, a role that infuriated her mother.

But established Nadira as the "quintessential vamp, the bad-girl foil to the docile heroine, decked up in a glamorous dress and smoking a cigarette," writes documentary filmmaker, Danny Ben-Moshe, whose 2017 film, *Shalom Bollywood*, traces the rise of Jewish women in the Indian film industry,

While in the Kahn film, Nadira played the part of a full-fledged heroine; in her next film, *Shree 420*, her studio image forever changed into a vamp. "The vamp was a very intriguing role," explains Nadira, "until today my portrayal is remembered as the best vamp character ever performed. You can't rewrite history.

"I was not the ideal Indian woman willing to endure the sacrifice of married life; to live and die for one man; to live for others, instead of my own self. I was not the Jewish mother of India. And though I played a fictitious role as a seductive, manipulative woman, who used her charm to lure men, the minds of audiences refused to me any other way of being in real life."

Ben-Moshe, charmingly explains that in the 1950s, Hindi and Islamic girls were not allowed to act in Bollywood films, so it was ironic that, in a nation filled with billions of Hindi, millions of Muslims, and Christians, and only a few thousand Jews, a handful of Jewish-Baghdadi women became movie stars. Leading ladies, Rose Ezra, Esther Victoria Abraham, whose stage name was Primilla (also the first woman film producer in Hindi films) and Ruby Myers, known as Sulochana, (the one with beautiful eyes) blazed the trail to superstardom for Nadira.

And, Ben-Moshe says, by the time mainstream Indian women entered the field in the 1960s- 70s & 80s, legendary Jewish stars were in less in demand, Sulcahana and Rose, forgotten by the industry they transformed, died, and, the once large Jewish community immigrated to Israel.

I met Nadira at the Taj Hotel, in Mumbai. Ours was a unique friendship. Whenever I visited India, her chauffeur picked me up in Nadira's Rolls-Royce, drove me to her apartment on Vasundhara Warren Road in South Bombay, a fancy building in a fancy neighborhood. We'd then either go to a restaurant for lunch, or hang out, amidst her Teak furniture, native to India, and artifacts inherited from her grandmother, mother, and her life in film.

Nadira's décor, more than credited her origins, it united worlds in which she took part. Her bookcases were filled with Hebrew and English copies of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran, written in Hindi. She had read them all; she did not believe in a punishing God, but in a merciful, just, kind, and benevolent God, she said.

Interspersed among the books were enamel boxes made in Bucharra, fine china from China, photos of her mother as a floor supervisor in the Royal Air Force with three stripes on her uniform, as well as a collection of meaningful spiritual art to ward off the evil eye.

There is an antique oil lamp menorah, a *Hanukiah*, affixed to a wooden Mogen Dovid (Star of David), hung on the wall above one of several alters, covered in white lace tablecloths, and bearing statues of Hindu Gods. This Menorah is a precious family heirloom, passed down from generation to generation. "I never light it," Nadira tells, "because I'm not married and never was married to a Jewish man. As a divorced woman, there's nothing doing. Lighting this menorah is a privilege granted only to a Jewish woman married to a Jewish man."

There are additional paintings of gods and goddesses intermixed with the most prized possession of all, the Hebrew Script Wall Hanging, divinely inspired *Shviti*, prized in the Jewish-Baghdadi community. Its biblical inscription reads, I have set the Lord always before me, *Psalms 16:8*.

The amulet is hung on the Eastern wall of Nadira's apartment, to mark the direction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and to protect her from Harm. "Its coded formulas are penned by a rabbi, who fasted forty days and nights, before inscribing the ornamental depiction, in real gold mixed with water, on parchment," Nadira explains. As the above verse is included in daily prayers and often appears in synagogues, Nadira willed the cherished wall hanging to her dearly loved Keneseth Elijahoo Synagogue in Bombay.

Raised by her grandparents, after her parent's divorced, Nadira recalls, "My grandparents did all that grandparents do for grandchildren. We lived well. My grandfather was a racehorse tipster, who never thought about tomorrow. God was the one who thought about tomorrow. He provided for his loved ones. If he had 100 rupees he spent it on us.

Her mother's story, too, is poignant. According to Nadira, "Every Jew in Iraq heard about this merchant from Bombay in search of a bride. All the Jewish families brought their eligible daughters to a garden party, where my father had come to choose his bride. My father chose my mother, a sixteen-year-old girl, who did not want to leave her family home and move to India as a wife. But, in those days, Iraqi daughters did what they were told. My mother's parents brought their daughter to India and left her with her new husband, my father. She never saw them again.

"My mother obediently did what her in-laws told her to do. She never argued; never complained. To them, she was an angel. She taught me, never say what's on your mind.

My father was a handsome man, who had a way with the ladies. He worked in a men's haberdashery, making fez caps, and as a bookmaker on the side, who bet men's money on numbers, horses, racecars and cotton figures. Wary of incriminating himself, he never wrote anything down, instead, he memorized, who bet what. Mother left him for a man, twice married, in search of yet another a wife to bear him a son. Eventually he left her too."

At our last visit, Nadira told me she was busy reading spiritual texts. "I'm having a hell of an affair with God," said the twice-divorced (like her mother) actress struggling still between faith and fame. When asked, which she would choose, were she to return to this world, she replied, " The ball is in God's court. **But, if the decision were mine, I'd have to come back as twins, one to marry a Jewish man, the other to be a star.**



When the beloved actress Maia Morgenstern made a grand entrance to the Bucharest Jewish Community Center, Kosher dining hall, at lunchtime, her arrival caused a stir among gossips, who worried she didn't eat enough, and that she looked undernourished.

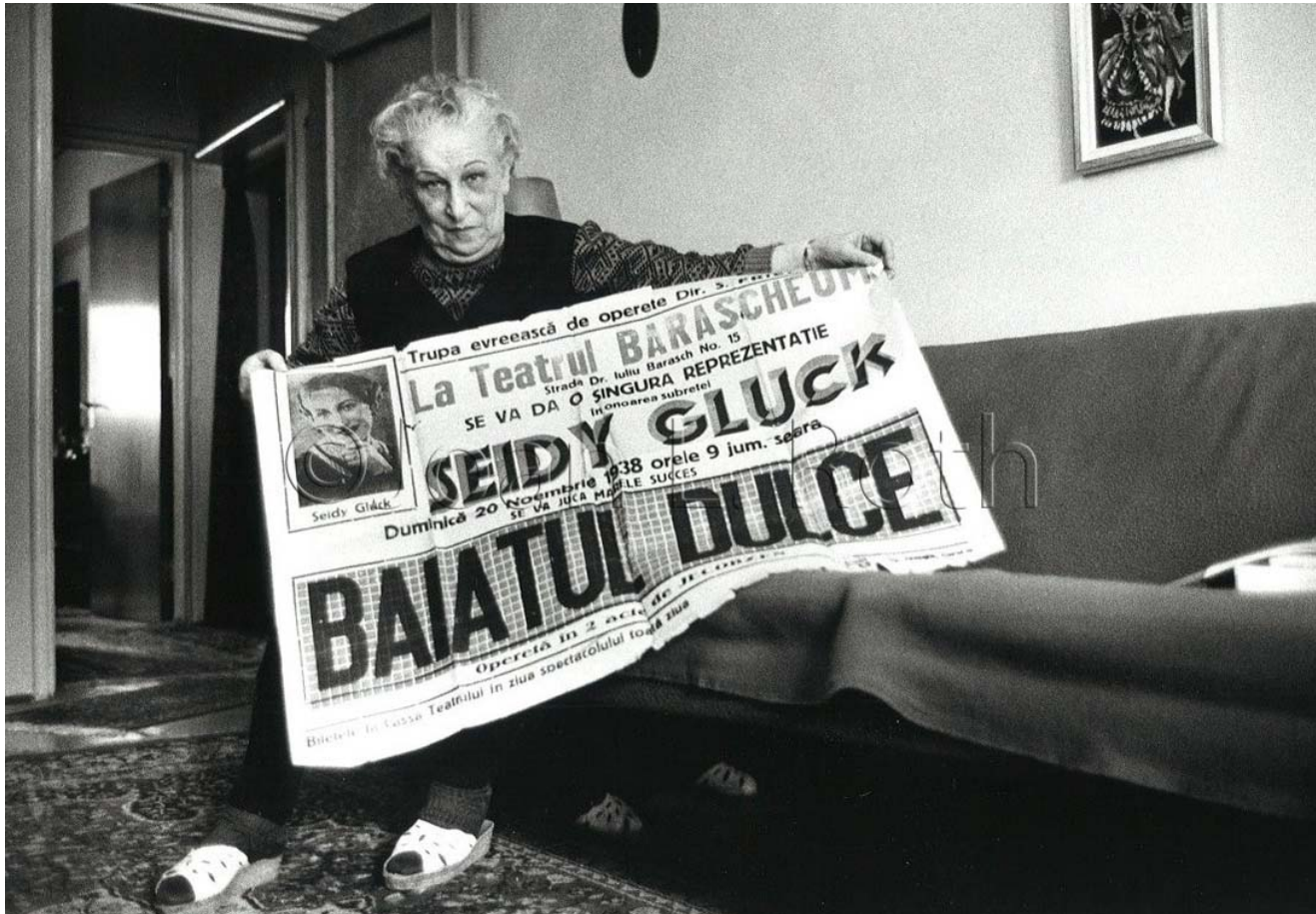
A child of the 1960s, Maia was brought up on the idea that the State Jewish Theater was propaganda. Her parents were devout Communists. They dreamed of raising a daughter who would have every opportunity and could pursue any goal. She could be a businesswoman a writer, a scholar or any combination she chose. One thing for sure, to safeguard their daughter's future, her parents did not recognize their heritage, or speak Yiddish, at home.

Maia's dream was to be an actress. "I waited eighteen years to fulfill this dream," she says. When she wasn't accepted into the theater program at the University of Bucharest, There was nowhere else to turn.

Seidy Gluck, the grand dame of the Yiddish Theater, took Maia under her wing, inviting her to rehearse with the troupe. Not just because she was Jewish - "No No No", insists Maia. "Seidy was super professional and very demanding."

Maia became fluent in Yiddish, the language her parent's feared most, under Seidy's tutelage. She was a natural at the classic actor's dialect, projecting the depth and breath of feelings to add meaning. Again, that which she learned from Seidy.

"From the moment Seidy enters until she leaves the stage. Her acting, speaking or being silent, moving or sitting, is a living tissue from which no cell is missing," writes Irina Lowendal, in her article, *Seidy Gluck 50 years of Theater*.



Seidy was born to the Yiddish stage. Both her parents were actors. She performed in children's roles throughout Romania and Poland, often playing the parts of boys. She played Yentl long before Barbara Streisand. But things happened: In 1941, there was a pogrom and Jewish life was no longer safe in Bucharest; in 1944 the government was overthrown and the Yiddish Theater was temporarily revived; then, in 1948, actors returned home from concentrations camps, and The Jewish State Theater was launched. Nothing was ever more important to Seidy than Keeping the Yiddish Theater alive.

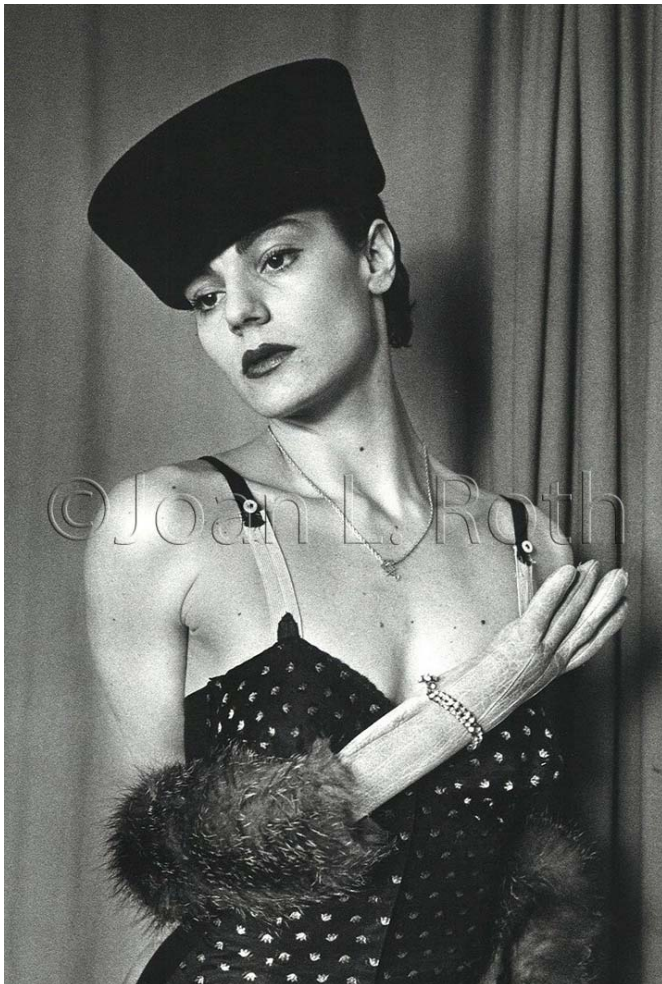
On May 5, 1985, the Jewish State Theater was crammed full, even the balcony was packed to capacity! People came not so much for the play, but for the sake of the actress, Seidy Gluck, who was celebrating 50 years of theater

Although retired, Seidy Gluck still is the first actress of the theater. Being the first actress doesn't mean that she is the most beautiful one, the best singer or the best dancer,

but the one that turns out to be ... the keeper and continuator of the best traditions of this theater, her stage presence is dense, consistent, like an essence of the best tea, that no matter how much water you would add to it, still keeps its beautiful amber color," the above text is written by Irina Lowendal, in her article, *Seidy Gluck 50 years of Theater*

The period, after the overthrow of Romanian Communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, in 1989, was a time of transformation, when change was brewing in souls across the country. By then, Maia had embraced her Yiddish roots, disclosed herself as a proud Jew, and better understood her parents fear: her grandfather was murdered at Auschwitz; her parents were survivors; her uncle was kicked out of the Communist party and arrested for being a Zionist. And, now, she would star, in the Jewish play *Ghetto*, at the Romanian National Theater, the most famous theater in Eastern Europe. Maia was the only Jew in a Jewish play, written by Israeli writer. Joshua Sobel, all the other actors were Romanian. She played the part of Hayyah (Chaya), a singer, caught stealing a kilo of beans, which led to the last performance at the Jewish theater in the Vilna Ghetto and to her disappearance.

To prepare for the part, Maia walked the streets where the ghetto used to be. She then came to the Kosher kitchen to be coached by Seidy over lunch. "The loyal Jewish soul who knows everything about Jewish life and about the Yiddish theater," Maia reminds me. Having grown up after the war, Maia, never knew much about ghettos, now because of the role she is playing, she is eager to learn.



The last performance in the Vilna Ghetto is based on a true story about a theater that performed during the Holocaust. After the extermination of over 50,000 Jews, 16,000 remained in the ghetto. The SS Commander ordered them to sort the clothing and found a kilo of beans looted by Hayyah, which he immediately spilled onto the floor. Giving the Jews one minute to pick them all up. When they failed to meet the goal, Hayyah was made to repay the debt in a special performance, at his behest.

According to Maia, preparing for this performance was a terrifying experience. In the scene, her costume is a prosthetic hand, bedecked in a long white leather glove,

ratty fur cuffs, and a fake diamond bracelet, found among the sorted clothing, to add the illusion of glamour.

Maia's performance received rave reviews. Some critics called it "spectacular." Her parents always told her, if you have talent don't wait; and, Seidy helped to inspire her return, not only to Judaism, but to her authentic self as an actress, teaching her everything she needed to know.

After lunch, Seidy invited me to ride the bus home with her. It was a roundabout journey, taking a long time to travel a short distance. On the way, I saw blackened trees, the result of burning, contrasted with the former despot Nicolae Ceausescu's, massive palace and the seat of the Parliament.

Seidy explained that to construct his Soviet-style architectural vision for the city. Ceausescu tore down the old Jewish neighborhood, where she had lived and thrived in the perfect apartment, accessible to direct transportation ten minutes to the theater. "Just like that," she said, "my life was devastated as he restructured the roads in a way that made it impossible for me to reach the theater. Thus, a heartbroken Seidy was forced to retire, as her life purpose had been taken from her.

She insists that her retirement wasn't a result of her need for luxury - meaning an easy way to get to the theater. That's not the point. The point is, she ponders, why did Ceausescu always have to ruin everything?

The above photograph of a melancholy Seidy, taken at home, in her living room as she displays the few mementos salvaged from her theatrical days. Most touching is the cherished promotional poster from 1938, which has been translated for me as follows - though I remain uncertain of its further meaning:

Jewish operetta troupe

At the Barascheum Theater

15, Juliu Barasch str.

only one presentation will be given in the honor of

SEIDY GLUCK

Sunday, November 20, 1938 at 9:30 P.M. great success will be played

SWEET BOY Operetta in 2 acts

May your life be a celebration, as is your every stage appearance for the spectators!

Irina Lowendal.

P.S. Maia achieved great fame, in 2004, as the Blessed Virgin Mary, in Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of the Christ*. Mel said, he thought her life of great significance when casting her.

In addition, Maia was awarded a star, on the Romanian walk of fame, in Bucharest, for her performance in the 1992 film, *The Oak*. The story is told through the voice a young woman named, Nela (played by Maia), the daughter of a former security police agent, who disobediently rejects the fulfillment of her duty to become the next generation of security operatives in the secret police.

A SPECIAL KIND OF LIGHT

A Special Kind of Light

BY JOAN ROTH

May Hashem bless you, wherever you are and be gracious to you.

Our understanding of the world is based on the physical elements of the world. The Sabbath is the only day in which we do not work. It is a day when we are not only free from the physical demands of the world, but we are also free from the spiritual demands of the world. It is a day when we are not only free from the physical demands of the world, but we are also free from the spiritual demands of the world. It is a day when we are not only free from the physical demands of the world, but we are also free from the spiritual demands of the world. It is a day when we are not only free from the physical demands of the world, but we are also free from the spiritual demands of the world.

Somebody says that the Sabbath is a day when we are not only free from the physical demands of the world, but we are also free from the spiritual demands of the world.

The Sabbath is a day when we are not only free from the physical demands of the world, but we are also free from the spiritual demands of the world.

Somebody says that the Sabbath is a day when we are not only free from the physical demands of the world, but we are also free from the spiritual demands of the world.

The Sabbath is a day when we are not only free from the physical demands of the world, but we are also free from the spiritual demands of the world.

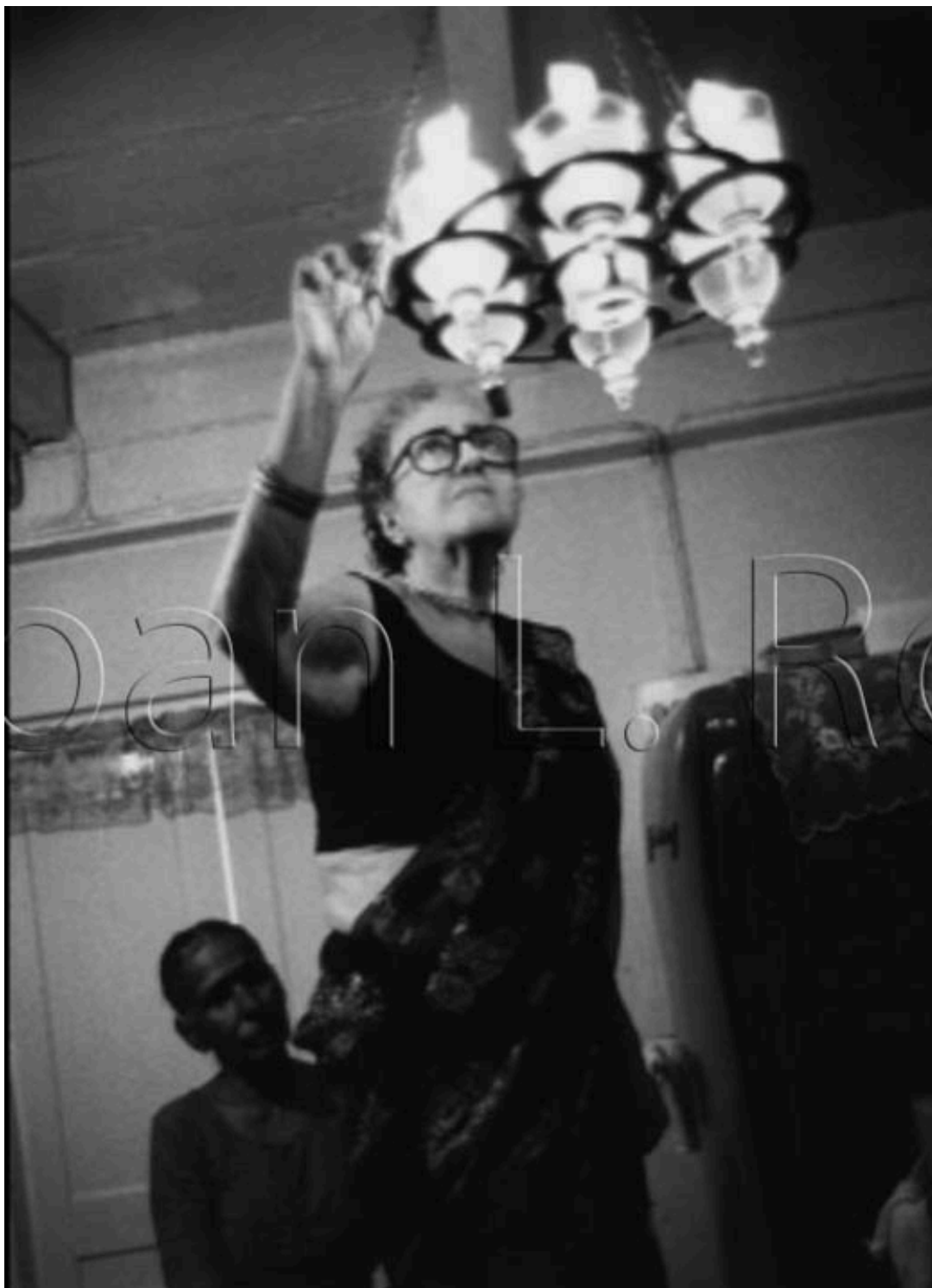
Sabbath and Festival Candle-Lighting Calendar 2000-2001/5761

A calendar calendar for the lighting of the Sabbath candles. It lists the times for lighting candles for each Sabbath and festival from 2000 to 2001. It includes the names of the Sabbaths and festivals, the times for lighting candles, and the times for the beginning and end of the Sabbath and festival.

Eve was created; she married, gave birth and tasted the forbidden fruit all in one day. By late Friday, just before the Sabbath, her exile was decreed. She and Adam were escorted to the gates of the Garden of Eden, where they expected to be ousted, but were spared by the sanctity bestowed upon the Sabbath. As the sky darkened, Eve, never having seen a sunset before, thought she had extinguished the light and brought darkness to the world. Then, she founded two stones and the frictional force of rubbing them together produced a spark. Thus, she was shown that she could bring back the light. And, so, the foreshadowing of our Jewish women's mission worldwide, to bring back the light through Sabbath candle-lighting, remains essential until today.



Eighteen minutes before sundown in Sa'dah, a Jewish-Yemeni woman kindles the light of an oil wall Lamp to draw down the Divine presence, because she deeply believes in, and adheres to, the obligation of her divine mission, which is to restore the holiness of light, not only to her home, but, to the world.



Esther Cohen lights Sabbath wicks in seven lamps filled with oil and placed inside a wrought iron chandelier, as her longtime attendant looks on, in Cochin, India. The seven oil lamps are reminiscent of the menorah in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), the sanctuary where God dwelled among the Jewish people as they wandered the wilderness, and was later placed in the Jerusalem Temple.



In Casablanca, Madame Ouanouhou follows the mystical tradition of Jewish-Moroccan women, who light Sabbath candles in every room of the house for spiritual healing. In conformity with the Sabbath blessing, a Jewish-Moroccan woman believes, the more candles she lights, the more Torah scholars she will birth.

In addition, Madame Ouanouhou, prays for her entire family, the world, her own healing, and a long life for His Majesty, the King of Morocco. She lights an additional candle for a special saint, "who will help you and cure your leg," she was told, after having been injured in a near fatal accident.



Having chopped and cooked the meat, boiled a vat of chickens, baked enough *challahs* (Sabbath pitas) in her own clay oven, preparing for approximately thirty-five guests for Friday night dinner. And, after, she cleaned and swept her kitchen spotless, washed her clothes and dipped herself into the *mikvah*, a Jewish-Bucharan women lights handspun cotton wicks, wrapped around thick pieces of wood, placed in tiny bowls brimming with oil, transformed into oil lamps resting on the mud ledges at the side of her oven.

Abeba Abebe



The extraordinary beauty of Abeba Abebe, nursing her son, evokes the lineage of the biblical Ruth and the Queen of Sheba, the great matriarchs, from whom she descends.