Having encountered so many groups who claim to have Jewish ancestry or come from the Lost Ten Tribes, we’re naturally skeptical about newly discovered communities. That’s why we were so surprised to discover an authentic kehillah on the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, abutting tribal warriors — but how did they manage to stay hidden all these years?

Text and photos by Ari Greenspan & Ari Z. Zivotofsky
But how did these Jews, who unflinchingly maintained their ancestors’ traditions, manage to stay under the radar all these years? There was a little-known community of Yemenite Jews who crossed over the Gulf of Aden into East Africa in the 1880s. Some of them went south through Ethiopia and Kenya and settled in present-day Tanzania, searching for financial opportunity. There they met up with Ethiopian and Moroccan Jews who’d also migrated south. Later, in the 1930s, a number of Polish Jewish refugees added to the number of Jews in the area. According to Yehudah, his own Yemenite ancestors came to Arusha from the Tanzanian offshore island of Zanzibar, where they’d set themselves up as traders.

Yemenites are famed for passing on their tradition in a mimetic and practical way from a young age. And that’s how it was practiced on the outskirts of Arusha. Hidden in the verdant African hills, in the shadow of the Kilimanjaro volcanoes, was their small synagogue. Due to surrounding hostilities, the Jews kept a low profile, until the community scattered in response to aggressive missionary activity and religious persecutions in the 1960s, when the synagogue was destroyed and their sefer Torah most likely burned. The instability, and religious persecutions in the 1960s, when the synagogue was destroyed and their sefer Torah most likely burned. The stability of the Kilimanjaro volcanoes, was their small synagogue. The older generation kept in touch after they were dispersed, and some members never stopped practicing Judaism or hoping to one day come with Tanzania’s independence from Britain in 1961 prompted many Jews to leave the country, and those who remained were forced underground and kept their religious identity secret. Some of them even chose to live among the wandering Maasai tribe, where they felt safe and wouldn’t be spotted.

The older generation kept in touch after they were dispersed, and some members never stopped practicing Judaism or hoping to one day have the freedom to rejoin their brethren out in the open. But many younger people didn’t even know their parents and grandparents were Jewish. All they knew was that their parents didn’t work on Saturday and were vegetarian, and the children were forbidden to eat meat at their friends’ homes.

The widely dispersed and disconnected Jews spanned the country, including the Muslim-majority island of Zanzibar. In fact, Yehudah says that he knows some Jews still living there who possibly possess ancient handwritten Yemenite manuscripts.

**Doubt and Certainty**

Having seen so many groups who claim to be Jewish, have Jewish ancestry, or come from the Lost Ten Tribes, we approach every encounter with some skepticism. That’s why we were constantly amazed at what came out of Yehudah’s mouth in the name of his father and grandfather: Midrashim, halachos, gmaras, and minhagim that were clearly part of a strong unbroken chain of oral tradition. Yehudah’s father imbued a love of Judaism in his heart, teaching him Yemenite prayers and tunes in a dialect similar, though not identical, to the unique Yemenite Hebrew pronunciation that is to be found in any Yemenite shul around the globe.

The dark-skinned Yemenites were accustomed to traveling, and moved easily back and forth between Egypt and deeper Africa. Yehudah remembers as a boy traveling to Egypt with his father, who was a dealer in gems. They went by donkey, camel, lorry, or any other means available, and he has distinct memories of uncompromised Jewish observance being a part of their travels — never touching a piece of nonkosher food, always stopping on Shabbos, and making sure to break in order to daven. Yet their family and compatriots were isolated from other larger Jewish communities.

When we were there, we met Shimon, Yehudah’s brother, who reads Hebrew but only speaks Swahili and Arabic (we communicated with Yehudah in English). Shimon was visiting from his home in the city of Dar es Salaam, the former capital and one of Africa’s biggest cities, with a whopping 4.5 million inhabitants. He has business there, but he and his wife and three daughters are isolated from other Jews, and he worries about their chinuch and outside influences. He’s in the process of moving his family to Arusha, where Yehudah’s little community is located.

Yehudah is a successful, well-connected lawyer, as well as a lecturer at Mount Meru University. His engaging, friendly, and modest demeanour make it easy to see why people like him. He told us that he often appears in court where one is obligated to uncover his head, yet a Muslim judge was sympathetic to his hesitation and permitted him to wear a yarmulke, which he now proudly dons in court. He’s not shy about walking around town with his yarmulke and tztizis.

As we listened to him relate halachos, midrashim, and Jewish tales, it was hard to believe that this man in his forties never had any kind of formal Jewish education and never lived in a normative community. It was like we had stumbled upon a Jewish Robinson Crusoe. All of his Jewish knowledge was from his revered father and grandfather.

“My father told me I can never use a pot, plate, or utensils until I dip them in the river,” he said, obviously referring to tevilas keilim, and that when in doubt about the status of a utensil, it should be thrust into the ground.
While driving us from the airport to his community, Yehudah mentioned that there was a Jewish cemetery not far off the road. In all the years he lived nearby he had never visited the cemetery, explaining that “My father told me Yemenite Jews don’t visit cemeteries.” And indeed that is the Baladi custom, based on the Rambam. But while he’d never been there previously, he was willing to look for it and take us there.

What we found was what had been a World War II-era Polish refugee camp. When Germany attacked Russia in 1941, violating the German-Russian alliance, Russia made a pact with the Polish government-in-exile and released the Polish detainees. Within a year, over 100,000 of these Poles fled to Iran, where the British helped find them refuge. Many of them traveled to British territories in East Africa, including several thousand who in 1942 settled in the small village of Tengeru, Tanzania, then called Tanganjika. This included dozens of Jewish families.

Almost all traces of the Polish presence in Tengeru are gone, but one thing that often remains after a community no longer exists is a cemetery. And in fact, a small, walled cemetery, whose upkeep is funded by Poland, contains about 150 graves. And sure enough, in the corner of that mostly Christian cemetery, are four Jewish graves lying perpendicular to the other tombstones, clearly marked with Magen Davids.

But the biggest surprise was yet to come. Schmoozing with the cemetery caretaker, he suddenly said, “You know, there used to be a synagogue here as well.” We, of course, would never pass up an old synagogue, and he told us that the building was still standing — it had become the local mosque. After much searching along dirt roads obscured with rich vegetation, we arrived at a small dilapidated building that serves as a mosque and madrasa, a Muslim school.

We took off our shoes and slowly entered a dark musty room, where a handful of serious looking white-robed teenagers were studying the Koran. And we were amazed by what we saw. Built in to the wall in the direction of Jerusalem was what had unquestionably been the aron kodesh. A small niche to hold the sifrei Torah had been built into the wall and protruded onto the outside, and the wooden doors covering it are still there. We opened the old scarred doors, dreaming of finding some ancient Jewish manuscript — but alas, all it held were old works on the Koran in Arabic. As we peeked into the little religious school, the kids stood up out of respect, and as serious as they seemed, they still jumped at the chance for a picture, giggling and smiling at the white men in kippot.

Yehudah and his wife Efrat, with their three daughters aged 6 to 13, maintain a kosher home, something not trivial in Tanzania. Their kitchen is color-coded for fleishig and milchig sides, although due to the difficulty in obtaining kosher meat, the fleishig side is rarely used. Many products in the Kahalani kitchen are imported from South Africa and certified by the South African beis din. Yehudah pointed out to us the kosher symbol on the cereal and milk that we then had for breakfast, and took us to a supermarket to show us what was available.

Meat is more difficult to obtain. After we shechted ten chickens for the community, Yehudah told us his father was a shochet who often shechted sheep and goat, and occasionally chicken. They attempted to catch the wild Thomson’s gazelle several times, but never succeeded. His father told him that guinea fowl is kosher, and although they never caught and shechted one, they did eat the eggs. He remembers his dad trapping quail in a net, but if a bird flew off the shelves.

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and all he knew about his heritage was that his Meshulam grew up among the Maasi warriors, explained, the locusts in Tanzania are not of the grasshopper, however, Yehudah had a tradition to eat the kosher species kasher to eat liver, as it is complicated to related that his father had instructed not water or vinegar as per the Rambam), and chalitah (dropping the meat into boiling described the Yemenite practice of He remembers how Shulchan Aruch. “My father told me a shochet should be a moral person who does mitzvot and doesn’t sin,” Yehudah says, echoing sentiments found in the Gemara and and doesn’t sin,” Yehudah says, echoing sentiments found in the Gemara and Shabbos Aruch. He remembers how to kasher meat by salting, amazingly kasher to meat by salting, amazingly described the Yemenite practice of chalitah (dropping the meat into boiling water or vinegar as per the Rambam), and related that his father had instructed not to eat liver, as it is complicated to kasher. And of course, like all Yemenites, they had a tradition to eat the kosher species of the grasshopper, however, Yehudah explained, the locusts in Tanzania are not the same ones the Jews ate in Yemen. But they remember the traditional belief that during the horrific 1679 exile of nearly all of Yemenite Jewry to the deadly desert of Mawza, those locusts were miraculously sent by G-d and saved many of the Jews, including his own ancestor, Kahalani Merari. Yehudah also explained that his father used to designate an area of a local wheat field and keep it under watch from before the planting until the harvesting. He would use that wheat to bake matzah for Pesach and shemurah matzah for the Seder. Out of Hiding In recent years the Tanzanian government has become pro-Israel and Yehudah felt comfortable coming out publicly as a Jew. Yehudah says there are many others like him, but they have either emigrated, assimilated, or are still afraid to surface. Still, it’s been ten years since his father passed away and even longer since he was an active community leader, but Yehudah cannot forget the charge his father gave him to preserve the traditions, reunite the people, and restore the sefer Torah. And so, he purchased land on the outskirts of the city of Arusha, where the old shul used to be located, and today uses a good deal of his personal money for the sake of the community. He has built a small shul (that he named after the “poet of Yemen,” the 17th-century Rabbi Shalom Shabazi, whose name he invokes often) and beis medrash, which draws up to 70 people medrash, which draws up to 70 people reminiscent of another tradition. the planting until the harvesting. He remembers how Shulchan Aruch. “My father told me a shochet should be a moral person who does mitzvot and doesn’t sin,” Yehudah says, echoing sentiments found in the Gemara and Shabbos Aruch. 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The Promise But how would he fulfill his father’s request to restore the sefer Torah? Last summer Yehudah started sending out feelers looking for a sefer Torah, at the same time that Kehillat Beth Israel, a synagogue in Ottawa, was looking for a small congregation that could use one of their Torah scrolls. This past November a delegation of 38 North American Jews visited Arusha to present Yehudah and his group with a kosher sefer Torah, Hertz Chumashim, and ArtScroll siddurim (although Yehudah is wont to refer to a siddur by the name used by Yemenites — tik’al). Among the group was an 85-year-old Holocaust survivor who donated a mezuzah, and when Yehudah asked her if she could make the kilometer-plus trek down a muddy road, she answered that if the Shoah didn’t stop her, neither would a muddy walk. On a regular Shabbos, between 10 and 20 people join him. Most are extended family, plus some young men and boys. All have a Jewish connection, and although their lineage can’t always be precisely traced, Yehudah says he’s turned away individuals who want to join that are explicitly not Jewish. One special young man, Meshulam, grew up among the Maasi warriors, although his mother would never cook on Shabbos, and his father wouldn’t even let them go outside on Shabbos. Once he figured out his Jewish connection, he moved to Arusha and is now an active member of the community — his wife, a medical doctor, and their two young tents for his many Shabbos guests, while his wife Efrat cooks for the masses. Some members of the community have relocated to larger, more established places, including Israel, but Yehudah says that for now, at least, he’s staying put. The community needs him, he says, and as long as most of them aren’t moving, he will stay. About two years ago, Yehudah realized that if he was to lead his people, he’d need to start learning for real — and so he reached out to “Partners in Torah” to arrange for a chavrusa. He was partnered with Rabbi Yerachmiel Landy of Passaic, and the two of them now learn for half an hour every day except for Shabbos. In describing their learning and friendship, Rabbi Landy is grateful for the opportunity. “Yehudah Kahalani very much personifies the sustaining traits carried from the ancient legacy of Jewish communities and their proud and distinct presence in Africa,” Rabbi Landy says. “It’s the juggle of his daily, nonstop dedication to the Arusha community while being a prominent lawyer, law professor, and judicial panelist. For me personally, our Torah study has forged a deep friendship.” The appreciation is mutual. Yehudah describes Rabbi Landy as more than a teacher. “He’s the greatest friend and has become like family.” Rabbi Landy has been a mainstay in assisting with communal needs, shipping them pairs of tefillin, books, and holiday items.
Yehudah’s father would repeat the Shemoneh Esreh in Arabic so that the community could follow, and he reads it in English from the ArtScroll siddur.