

The ‘Shtisel’ mania

Orthodox pack largest Reform temple in NYC

By DANIEL TREIMAN
JTA

NEW YORK — Would the builders of New York’s Temple Emanu-El ever have imagined that their congregation’s sanctuary would one day be packed to the balconies with thousands of devout followers of a black-hatted Orthodox rabbi and his family?

Sellout for the Israeli TV series

That was the scene last week when the citadel of high Reform Judaism on Manhattan’s Upper East Side was overtaken by “Shtisel”-mania.

Fans of the Israeli TV series about the day-to-day dramas of a *haredi* — that is, fervently-Orthodox — family in Jerusalem filled the Fifth Avenue synagogue to see the show’s three stars discuss their surprise Netflix-streamed hit.

Demand was so intense that the organizers — Emanu-El’s Streicker Center, the Jewish Week Media Group and UJA-Federation of New York — added a second night when the first quickly sold out.

Some 4,600 attended over the two nights, according to the event’s sponsors.



SHTISEL

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Letter from Azerbaijan

Jewish life in the Muslim country flourishes — how’s and why’s



The ark in the newly built synagogue for Mountain Jews in Baku. A new museum of the Mountain Jews is under construction in Quba, the historical home of Azerbaijan’s Mountain Jews.

Farah Khan

Mixture of Farsi and Hebrew for the ‘Juhuro’

By SHANA R. GOLDBERG
IJN Assistant Publisher

BAKU — Meet the real Mountain Jews. No, they’re not from Leadville or Fairplay. In fact, they’re not even from Colorado. The real Mountain Jews hail from a remote corner of the Caucasus Mountains, descendent from Persian Jewry.

I had the opportunity to meet with members of this ancient Jewish community during my recent trip to Azerbaijan, one of the three Caucasus countries. That simple dichotomy of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewry? It doesn’t exist, and one of the benefits of growing global connectivity is that we’re discovering all kinds of Jews most of us never knew about.

Mountain Jews have been a known ethnic Jewish subset since the 5th century BCE, inhabiting areas of ancient Persia, parts of which today are in Azerbaijan and elsewhere in the region. Most of today’s Mountain Jewish community in Azerbaijan began arriving in the 13th century and continued migrating in the centuries that followed.

Like so many other Jewish groups, Mountain Jews speak a unique dialect, an adaptation of the *lingua franca*, in their case Persian, or Farsi, mixed with a smattering of Hebrew. Juhuri it’s called, and in their language, Mountain Jews are known as Juhuro.

This community has continued to exist, uninterrupted in Azerbaijan, through the Holocaust, through a Soviet regime that suppressed religion. Now, under a government that actively encourages religious life, Mountain Jews are thriving. Older synagogues are being refurbished; a new museum dedicated to the history of the Mountain Jews is underway; a yeshiva has been established; and, in the capital city of Baku, a new synagogue has been constructed.

While Baku is home to most of Azerbaijan’s Jews, it is the Qirmizi

azerbaijan

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IJN
reports
from
Baku

US: Leave Haifa port Israel-run

WASHINGTON (JTA) — A major spending bill in the Senate includes a veiled warning to Israel not to allow China to run one of its ports.

The National Defense Authorization Act is in its final stages of passage and is likely to be approved by the Republican-led Senate.

It includes a “sense of the Senate” passage stating that “the US has an interest in the future forward presence of US naval vessels at the Port

china

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Israel hits Iran in Syria preemptively

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel is dealing with outside threats by striking back and also preemptively, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said June 12, hours after Israel apparently fired at an Iran-backed Hezbollah facility on the Syria border.

Syrian state media reported that Israel fired several missiles at a town on the Golan Heights border and said its air defenses had intercepted several of the rockets. Netanyahu’s remarks were an apparent

iran in syria

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Sara Netanyahu admits guilt

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Sara Netanyahu, the wife of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, admitted in court Sunday, June 16, that she misused state funds to order catered meals from high-end restaurants.

Her plea deal signed in late May involves no jail time, but she will pay \$15,210 as part of a fine and of restitution, and now has a criminal record.

She was convicted of intentionally making use of another’s error in a case that accused

guilty

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NEWS: Azerbaijan

Home of the ‘Mountain Jews’

A 10,000 strong Ashkenazi community also thrives



OUTREACH

Jewish youth celebrate at the Ashkenazi community’s recent Purim party.

Courtesy Rabbi Shneur Segal

AZERBAIJAN

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Qesebe neighborhood of Quba, a town northeast of the capital, that is the historic and cultural heartland of Azerbaijan’s Mountain Jews. In this “red village,” as Qirmizi Qesebe translates in English and Russian, Jews are the predominant ethnic group. Synagogues line the streets. Stars of David decorate facades. *Mezuzahs* dot doorways. It is home to a yeshiva, kosher

A kosher restaurant; synagogues; day schools

butcher and newly trained rabbis. This where the new museum — construction already underway — will be. The imposing red brick building will also be home to a gym, wedding hall and community center. The museum is an exact replica of a synagogue that once stood there, embodying this community’s connection to its past, while recognizing that attracting and retaining younger Jews will require newer, modern facilities.

In Baku, in the newly built shul for Mountain Jews, Milikh Yevdayev, head of the Mountain Jews community, recounts how during the Soviet era there was deep concern about who would pass on their centuries-old traditions. While the community continued to exist under that repressive rule, “it was harder to practice,” says Yevdayev. “Now we can practice freely.” Over tea and sweets — seemingly an Azerbaijani custom, as a homey spread greeted us at every stop — Yevdayev proudly shares the community’s accomplishments, and its

challenges. Like many small communities here in the US too, Mountain Jews are confronted with ensuring continuity and countering assimilation, not to mention, the reality of young Jews moving to larger Jewish hubs, whether in Russia, the US or Israel. Quba’s Mountain Jewish community has shrunk to some 3,000 since a heyday of around 10,000 in the 1980s. For the Mountain Jews of Azerbaijan, maintaining their unique customs is important, and

they’ve met the challenge head on. Three rabbis serve the communities, locals who studied in Israel and Russia but returned home to serve their communities. They also serve as *shochtim* and *mohels*. The yeshiva in particular is important, as Jewish knowledge — even the ability to read rudimentary Hebrew — had almost disappeared by the end of the Soviet period. The museum-cum-community center is also part of efforts to ensure the future viability of Jewish life in Quba. Making it all possible in large degree, is financial and moral support from Azerbaijan’s government.

Azerbaijan, a predominantly Muslim country (96%) is home to a sizable Jewish community of 30,000 people and eight synagogues. According to Jewish communal leaders, both Ashkenazi and Mountain, the government strongly supports its Jewish communities, of which there are actually three: Georgian Jews, which, unfortunately, the delegation I was part of did not have the oppor-

tunity to meet. I first met Rabbi Shneur Segal, head of the Ashkenazi community, at the opening ceremony for the Fifth World Forum on Intercultural Dialogue, May 2-3, the conference for which I was invited to Azerbaijan. He was one of the visibly Jewish attendees in a mass of hundreds of people. Later he was also present at panel discussion on multiculturalism, at which Milikh Yevdayev participated. There are about 10,000 Ashke-

nazi Jews in Azerbaijan, many of whom are Russian. Although our delegation did not officially meet with the Ashkenazi community, Rabbi Segal filled me on his community’s vibrancy. He shared photos from recent communal events, such as a Purim dinner as well as a youth Shabbaton.

Segal also represents Azerbaijani Jewry outside the country, either by accompanying local students to Jewish gatherings elsewhere in Europe (soon after the forum he was on such a mission in Italy and Croatia) or leading a delegation of representatives of the World Jewish and Euro Asian Jewish Congresses to meet Azerbaijan’s president, Ilham Aliyev.

Segal, who is a Chabad rabbi, says that through events and other activities, what he calls an “outreach policy,” the community reaches 3,000-4,000 Jews per year.

The “close relationship” the community maintains with the government means support, financial and otherwise, for important Jewish infrastructure, such as day schools, of which there are two in Baku. Recently, a kosher restaurant under his supervision, named 7/40, opened in Baku.

In Quba, Milikh Yevdayev is our guide, a fitting role for someone who sees himself as a messenger, both for Azerbaijan and the Mountain Jewish community. While Mountain Jews may not be an everyday term for most of the world’s Jews, they are a proud community with a deeply engaged Diaspora. It was Mountain Jews living in Moscow who renovated the first synagogue following the Soviet period.

While in Quba, we meet a group of Israeli Jews descended from Quba, who have returned to seek out their roots and pay homage. This is typical, says Yevdayev. If Mountain Jews move overseas, he says, they stay connected. “It’s in their souls.”

Yevdayev himself, although he lives in Baku, is building a second home in Quba to keep his descendants — who live in Azerbaijan, Russia and the US — connected to their place of origin.

“It’s to ensure legacy,” he says, proudly guiding us through his palatial home, still being renovated.

The country couldn’t ask for a stronger representative. He is deeply — and perhaps equally — proud of his Azerbaijani and Jewish roots. At the synagogue in Baku he points out the photos — one of his father — of the local Jewish Red Army veterans who fought in WW II.

He also tells us the story of Albert Agaranov, whose memorial at Martyr’s Lane we visited on our first day in Baku.

Agaranov, a Mountain Jew, died

in the Nagorno-Karabkh War, during the battle of Shusha in 1992. According to what we were told, Agaranov was a tank commander who died because he left his tank to remove the bodies of dead Azerbaijani soldiers lying on the streets. He is now part of Martyr’s Lane, a memorial park in central Baku overlooking the Caspian Sea that honors Azerbaijani citizens who died in “Black January,” as the 1991 uprising against the Soviets is called, and during the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

In 2015, a public celebration of a new *Sefer Torah* paraded through Baku’s streets

He is remembered, too, in a memorial plaque in Baku’s newest synagogue

For Yevdayev, this pride in Mountain Jews is inextricably linked with his pride in Azerbaijan. He has a masterful command of Azeri poetry and song (an impromptu performance over lunch with generous amounts of vodka attested to that), and is, according to our local guides, extremely articulate in the language.

While the two communities — Ashkenazi and Mountain — maintain good relations, for Yevdayev the Mountain community is more deeply rooted in Azerbaijan. Its first language is Azerbaijani, as opposed to Russian.

The Mountain Jews, he says, are more concentrated, while Ashkenazi Jews are more spread out. There is even a parliamentarian, Yevdov Abramov, who is a Mountain Jew.

Some of the Mountain Jewish cus-

toms resemble those of local Azerbaijani customs, he says.

Indeed, we witnessed this when visiting one of the synagogues in Quba. Before entering the sanctuary, we were instructed to remove our shoes, a custom widely practiced in Islam. Did the local Jews adapt it from their Muslim neighbors? Or is it a pragmatic custom that evolved to protect the beautifully decorated rugs that overlap the synagogue’s floor, covering every inch?

Most of Azerbaijan’s 20,000 Moun-

tain Jews live not in Quba, however, but in Baku, which is why that city is home to the country’s newest synagogue. At the time the synagogue was built, in 2015, a new Torah was commissioned and heavily supported by the Los Angeles Sinai Temple.

When it arrived in Baku, there was a public *hachnasat Sefer Torah*, or celebratory procession. The community marched through the streets, with locals looking on or even joining in, says Yevdayev.

To him, that moment encapsulated Azerbaijan. He feels that Azerbaijan, as a Muslim country, is unique in its support for its Jewish community. Mountain Jews, he says, are not merely tolerated in Azerbaijan, they are respected and viewed as part of the larger culture.

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LOCAL HERO

Jewish Azerbaijani Albert Agaranov is memorialized in Baku’s Martyr’s Lane.

Nurit Greenger

NEWS

‘Concentration camps’ on US southern border — says Ocasio-Cortez

NEW YORK (JTA) — Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said this week that detention centers holding undocumented immigrants on the southern border are “concentration camps.”

“The US is running concentration camps on our southern border, and that is exactly what they are,” the freshman New York Democrat said Monday, June 17, in an Instagram Live video.

“If that doesn’t bother you . . . I want to talk to the people that are concerned enough with humanity to say that ‘never again’ means something.”

She tweeted the same message on Tuesday.

“This administration has established concentration camps on the southern border of the US for immigrants, where they are being brutalized with dehumanizing conditions and dying,” she wrote. “This is not hyperbole. It is the conclusion of expert analysis.”

Ocasio-Cortez then linked to an *Esquire* article quoting Andrea Pitzer, author of *One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration Camps*.

Pitzer asserts, as she did in an interview with JTA last year, that

what the government calls federal migrant shelters or detainment facilities fit her definition of concentration camps: “mass detention of

“Hey Rep. Cheney, since you’re so eager to ‘educate me,’ I’m curious: What do YOU call building mass camps of people being detained with-

‘The US is running concentration camps on our southern border’

civilians without trial.”

The congresswoman’s critics said Ocasio-Cortez has to know that using the term “concentration camp” invariably invites comparisons to the Nazis. And by doing so, they insist, she belittles the ways Jews suffered when the Nazis turned the camps into death camps.

“Six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust. It is disgraceful for Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to compare our nation’s immigration policies to the horrors carried out by the Nazis,” the Republican Jewish Coalition said in a statement.

Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., joined the condemnation, tweeting at Ocasio-Cortez, “do us all a favor and spend just a few minutes learning some actual history. 6 million Jews were exterminated in the Holocaust. You demean their memory and disgrace yourself with comments like this.”

The Democrat replied.

out a trial?” Ocasio-Cortez tweeted.

“How would you dress up DHS’s mass separation of thousands children at the border from their parents?”

The liberal Jewish group Bend the Arc came to Ocasio-Cortez’s defense.

“Whether we call them concentration camps, mass detention centers, or cages for children, they are a moral abomination,” its CEO, Stosh Cotler, said in a statement.

The Jewish Community Relations Council of New York was critical of Ocasio-Cortez’s comments, saying that while it was concerned “about the conditions experienced by migrants seeking asylum in the US,” it was “deeply disturbed” by her use of the terms “concentration camps” and “never again.”

The terms, said the policy group, “are synonymous with and evocative of the atrocities committed by

Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany in which six million European Jews were systematically denied civil and human rights due to their race and ultimately murdered in a state-sponsored genocide.”

The statement added: “As concerned as we are about the conditions experienced by migrants seeking asylum in the US, including family separation, unusable facilities, and lack of food, water and medical resources, the regrettable use of Holocaust terminology to describe these contemporary concerns diminishes the evil intent of the Nazis to eradicate the Jewish people.”

On average, 50,000 people are being held in more than 200 detention centers across the country, including county jails and privately run facilities.

Those in ICE custody include asylum-seekers, those awaiting deportation or court dates and those in custody for civil immigration violations such as overstaying their visas or being in the country illegally.

According to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, “an aggressive inspections program . . . ensures its facilities follow ICE’s National Detention Standards.”

The standards “ensure that detainees in ICE custody reside in

safe, secure and humane environments and under appropriate conditions of confinement.”

Immigrant advocates like the ACLU say many of the facilities do not meet those standards.

“Immigration detention poses life-threatening health and safety risks for the tens of thousands of people who are locked up across the country,” asserts Victoria López, senior staff attorney for the ACLU’s National Prison Project.

Holocaust scholars urge caution when making Holocaust comparisons or using terminology most commonly associated with the Nazi era.

Edna Friedberg, a historian at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, made the point in a December essay.

“Careless Holocaust analogies may demonize, demean and intimidate their targets. But there is a cost for all of us because they distract from the real issues challenging our society, because they shut down productive, thoughtful discourse,” she wrote.

“At a time when our country needs dialogue more than ever, it is especially dangerous to exploit the memory of the Holocaust as a rhetorical cudgel. We owe the survivors more than that.

“And we owe ourselves more than that.”

Azerbaijan

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Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, fell during my trip to Azerbaijan. This important day wasn’t forgotten in Azerbaijan. It was marked in a ceremony hosted by the Israeli embassy, but attended by both foreign dignitaries and local parliamentarians.

The ceremony took place in a beautifully restored mansion built by the Nobels (key industrialists in Baku’s first oil boom in the early 20th century). Somber violin music threaded the ceremony, poetry was recited, words were spoken. The sacrifice of the Red Army, specifically its Azeri component, during WW II was highlighted.

Did I expect to attend a Yom HaShoah ceremony in a Muslim country? No. Honestly, what was remarkable about the experience was how unremarkable it was. During my short trip to Azerbaijan I never felt neither special nor different because I was Jewish. It simply felt normal.

Home to 30 cultures, Azerbaijan is trying to create a sense of home for its varied populations. Its conflict with Armenia means that its relationship with Christian churches is different from its relationship with Jewish synagogues, but the country maintains 14 active churches of various denominations, including Armenian.

Unfortunately we did not have time to visit a church, which would have added even another dimension to the whirlwind tour.

At the Multicultural Center we visited, its executive director Ravan Hasanov told us that “people feel at home here.”

When it comes to its Jewish citizens, whether from its Ashkenazi or Mountain Jewish communities, a sense of home pervades.

“We feel safe, not persecuted,” says Yevdayev.

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Terror attack or violent crime? Seven-year-old girl raped, abducted allegedly by Palestinian man

By MARCY OSTER

JTA

JERUSALEM — A Palestinian working as a maintenance man at a school in a West Bank settlement was charged with the rape and abduction of a seven-year-old Jewish girl.

On Monday, June 17, a day after he was indicted in a West Bank military court, several right-wing lawmakers alleged that the rape was a terror attack, though the Military Advocate General’s Office said it found no evidence that the attack was nationalistically motivated.

The indictment came after a three-

month police investigation, according to reports.

The man denies the charges.

The accused, who is from the West Bank village of Dir Kadis, allegedly became friendly with the girl by giving her sweets, finally bringing her to a building near the school where he held her against her will and raped her.

The girl reportedly told police that at least two other men who knew the accused Palestinian were present at the time of the rape.

The name of the Jewish settle-

ment and of the girl and her family are under a gag order so that she will not be publicly identified.

Avigdor Liberman, head of the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, called for the death penalty “for the heinous terrorist.”

“It’s not pedophilia, it’s pure terrorism, one of the most serious cases I’ve heard of in the past few years,” he said in a post on Facebook.

Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely of Likud in a tweet called

the attack “sexual terror” and decried “how low can our enemies sink.”

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a tweet called the rape “shocking” and said it “shakes all of our hearts.” He called for punishment to the fullest extent of the law.

This led Labor lawmaker Shelly Yacimovitch to note on Twitter that this is only the second time that Netanyahu has addressed rape, “and the other was also to offer nationalistic incitement.”

Israel acts in Syria

iran in syria
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acknowledgement of the reported attack.

“The chain of tests that we are dealing with is unending,” he said at the state memorial ceremony for former President Ephraim Katzir.

“We respond vigorously and with force to all attacks against us. However, we do not take action only after the fact. We deny the enemy’s capabilities before the

fact. We are acting methodically and consistently to prevent our enemies from establishing offensive bases against us in our vicinity.”

Hours after the alleged attack in Syria, Israel scrambled its fighter jets after a small drone from Lebanon penetrated Israeli airspace. The drone reportedly quickly returned to Lebanon.

Israel has been more direct in recent months about acknowledging airstrikes on Syria, usually targeted bases linked with Iran. ■

Sara Netanyahu not jailed

guilty
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her of ordering \$96,000 worth of meals rather than using the cook at the prime minister’s residence to prepare her food.

The state also can file a civil lawsuit to get Netanyahu to force the return the rest of the money, under the deal.

Sara Netanyahu violated the regulations that prevent those living in

the residence from ordering meals from the outside when there is a cook on staff. The violations occurred in 2010 and 2013.

The investigation began in 2015 after the State Comptroller’s Office issued a report on the Netanyahu family household expenses.

Ezra Saidoff, a former caretaker at the prime minister’s residence who also faced charges in the case, under a separate plea deal will pay a fine and perform community service. ■