Conferences

Compromises and Contributions: Yemenite Jews in Israel

The Chais Auditorium opened its doors to what, at first glance, appeared to be a heavy academic discussion entitled, "Cultural Compensations of Yemenite Jews in Israel." Academic yes, but also, entertaining.

And, while the topic may seem sectoral, the message is universal. To understand this fully, Dr. Aharon Gimani of Bar-Ilan University, specialist on Jewish life in Arab countries, examined the community's rich roots.

"It's true that every community observes its own customs," Prof. Gimani explained, "but the Yemenite customs are probably the closest of any other community to those of the Second Temple Period."

For hundreds of years, Rabbis would travel to Yemen to 'verify' the community's level of religiosity. But, when Operation Magic Carpet brought the bulk of Yemenite Jewry to Israel between 1949-1950 the question of religiosity was no longer an issue. True, Prof. Gimani explained, certain Yemenite customs had to change (such as parents arranging for pre-puberty marriages of their children) due to rulings made by the Chief Rabbinate, but these changes were not as dramatic or as earth-shattering as people expected, and many proved, in fact, to be better for the populace.

Prof. Gimani and Dr. Dani Bar-Maoz of the Open University touched upon the impact of aliyah on Yemenite women. Life in Israel led to a number of revolutionary changes. Yemenite women played a noteworthy role in Israel's underground movement (there had been several waves of Yemenite Jews emigrating to Israel prior to the establishment of the State), and the women played a greater role in education. Other changes, perhaps unwelcome, caused rifts between younger and older generations, but in the end, these changes helped to bring Yemenite Jewry into the fold of the new society evolving in the new State.

Prof. Weingarten, head of the Family Health Clinic in Rosh Ha'ayin (a city 10 kilometers east of Petah Tikvah with a large Yemenite population) took the audience on a visual tour of modern day Yemenite Jewish life. His focus, however, was not the community's colorful roots and culinary delicacies, but rather the alarming five-fold increase in the instance of diabetes within the community.

Prof. Yael Gilat, a graduate of the Open University of Israel, and now lecturer at Oranim College, spoke about changes in jewelry designs that took place in the aftermath of the community's aliyah. While many of the designs were considered quite extraordinary, modern market demands led to the de-emphasis of much of the spiritual and mystic content that had been closely identified with Yemenite jewelry-making throughout the centuries.

Dr. Bat-Zion Eraki Klorman, Head of the Open University's Department of History, Philosophy and Jewish Studies, and organizer of the event, wrapped up the seminar with a stirring reading of two poems by famed Yemenite poetess, Bracha Serri.

Whether or not your roots are embedded in the Yemenite community, the Open University's presentation conveyed universal messages about how an ancient society with well-entrenched customs can confront modern day challenges.

Maimonides and the Yemenite Jewish Community

"No one holds Maimonides in such great esteem as the Yemenite Jewish community," says Bar-Ilan's Dr. Aharon Gimani. When Saladin became sultan in the last quarter of the twelfth century and the Shi'ite Muslims revolted against him, the trials of the Yemenite Jews began. There were few scholars among them at that time, and a false prophet arose. One of Yemen's most respected Jewish scholars, Jacob ben Nathanel al-Fayyumi, asked renowned Sephardic Jewish theologian and Spanish physician resident in Egypt, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides) for his advice. Maimonides response – called "Iggeret Teman" (The Yemen Epistle) – was so powerful that even today the community proudly refers to it. Maimonides interceded with Saladin in Egypt, and shortly thereafter the persecution came to an end.