

FROM THE DAILY LIFE OF MIZRACHI JEWS IN NORTH AFRICA AND CENTRAL ASIA

For about a dozen years from the early 1970s into the 1980s, we brought our Confirmation classes from TSWE (and Temple Beth Tikvah in Wayne and the Reform congregation in Levittown, Pennsylvania) for six or seven weeks of touring Israel, giving them the opportunity to come to love *medinat Yisrael* through meeting Israelis, experiencing contemporary life and learning Israel's history. A special feature of our tours was the week our kids were sent in small groups to the moshavim affiliated with the Independent Liberal party of the Israeli Government, the Secretary General of which was the husband of the woman who made the technical on-the-ground arrangements for our trips.

During those weeks, we – and our then-quite-young daughters – went touring on our own, exploring new places to share and revisiting old favorites. One of the

places we returned to many times was a small shop in the Meah Shearim quarter of Jerusalem, populated mostly but not exclusively by ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jewish families. A Sephardic Jew from Afghanistan (or one of the other 'Stans) owned a small shop there crowded with antiques, antiquities and other assorted objects that again and again intrigued us enough to make a purchase now and again to justify our repeated visits with him. He described each of them in loving detail – most of which, sadly enough, we have now forgotten.

So, most of the objects pictured here, stripped of our usual amount of specific provenance and descriptive explanation, need to speak for themselves.

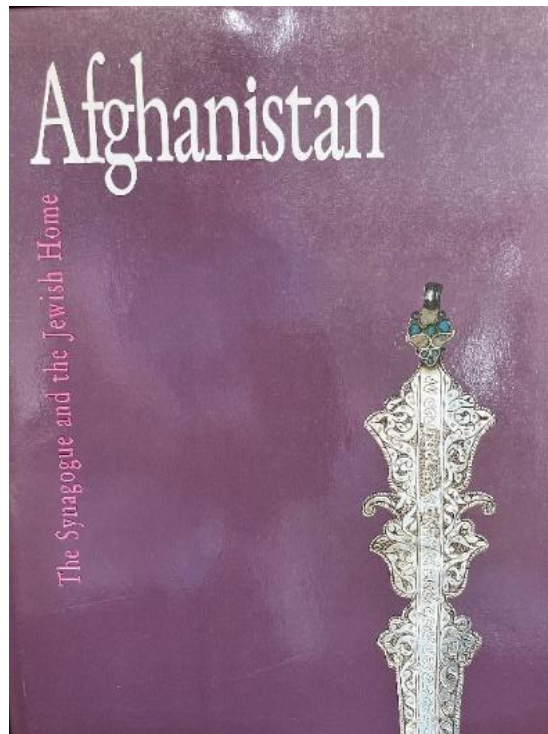
To the best of our knowledge, these copper- and (some) tin-clad objects for everyday use come from Mizrahi homes in Arab/Muslim lands: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – countries in which Jewish communities were established centuries ago along the fabled spice and silk routes between China and the Mediterranean.

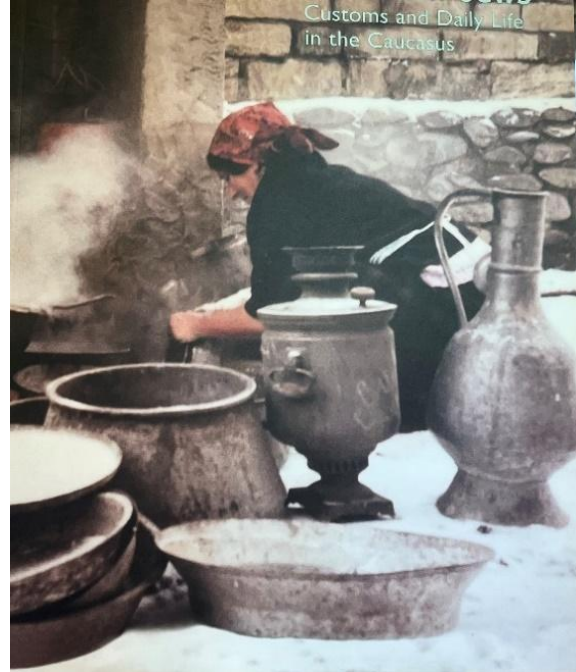
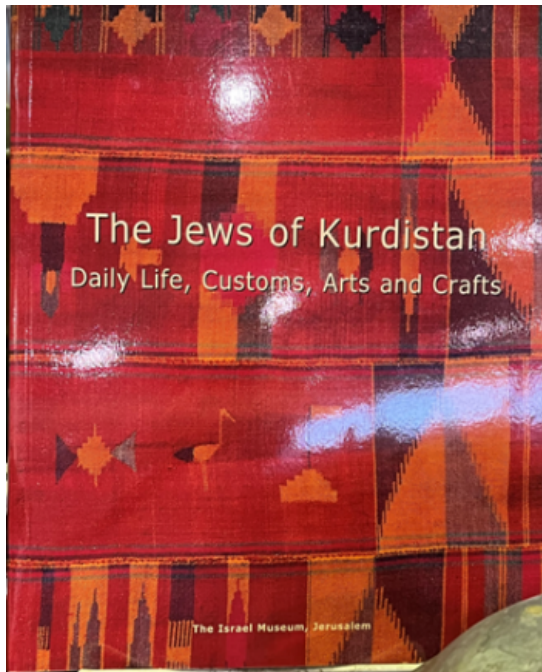






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Look at the embossed decorative floral and geometric designs, a few of which include the depiction of human figures on a pitcher, the hammered work, the writing in Arabic on the surface of at least one bowl. Note the mix of simple utility and sophistication.







In the center of the bottom shelf is a particularly noteworthy item called a *sham'dan*. We would ask you to guess what it is but as we had to be told, and were very surprised with the information, told to us by Professor Bracha Yaniv, author of one of the books in the case, we encourage you to read on. What you are looking at, a *sham'dan*, is a candleholder made by Jews in Afghanistan specifically for Yom Kippur.



Jewish traditions and customs for erev Yom Kippur differed greatly between now-vanished communities in the East and those we know in the West. While Western Jews acknowledge our sins in the *Al Het* prayer by gently tapping our chests, Jews in Afghanistan accounted for their mistakes by participating in a

literal ritual flogging. After the evening service, each male over bar mitzvah age was required to receive 39 strokes on their back with a soft leather flogger while Psalm 78 was read. After that, the rabbi would issue a pardon for the individual's sins.

While Jews in the West make the candle blessing over a pair of holiday tapers that might, at best, burn for an hour or two, Afghan Jews would light enormous candles they had created for each of their synagogues. These candles were over six feet tall and often held in place by a copper or clay candle holder known as a *sham'dan*.

The creation of the candles involved the entire community, which worked for more than a month under the supervision of local rabbis. High-quality wax was melted and gradually dripped around a braided cotton wick, made of six strands of cotton — one for each man to be called to the reading of the Torah on Yom Kippur. (Obviously, no women were called to the Torah.) It burned in the synagogue from erev Yom Kippur until prayers ended with the *Ne'ilah* service the following evening. Drops of the wax were said to be able to help cure the sick. In addition, the remains of the candle were used to make havdalah candles for use in the synagogue and for Simhat Torah, at which time they illuminated the sanctuary for a night of dancing and song.

The other item we want to call to your specific attention is a very large double-handed cup. Such cups are used by pious Jews specifically while saying the blessing for the washing of hands before eating every meal. Here is the prescribed method for its use: Hold the left handle of the vessel in your left hand while pouring water over the right hand and then reverse the procedure.



Here is the blessing:

Blessed are You, Eternal, our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who have sanctified us through Your commandments and commanded us concerning the washing of hands:

Barukh atah Adonai eloheinu, melekh ha-olam, asher kid-shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu ahl n'tilat yadayim.

It is customary to remain silent between the ritual washing of hands and the recitation of the *motzi*, the blessing over the bread.

The two dolls, the small camel saddle bag and the books add authenticity and color to a very interesting but otherwise monochromatic display. Please note that not every item in the case is pictured individually. You can find them in the three introductory photographs above.



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