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## **SYNAGOGUES IN YEMEN AND THEIR OBJECTS**

The article is based on written and oral sources about synagogue architecture and synagogue objects from the 18th to the 20th century. The information on the ceremonial objects of Yemenite synagogues is mainly based on objects brought to Israel from Yemen by Yemenite immigrants since the end of the 19th century and by European travelers and researchers who worked in Yemen.

*Key words:* Yemen, Jews, Judaism, Synagogues.

## Introduction

Jews have lived in Yemen for at least some 2000 years keeping old traditions made possible by the relative isolation of the Yemen and its Jewish community.

With the onset of Islam their status became one of foreigners (*dhimmī*), subject to Muslim law in regard to other religions, which influenced their social status but also the architecture of their houses and synagogues. They had to be of a modest nature not allowing any extravagant demonstration of religious worship.

Jews lived in over a thousand different locations in Yemen, many of them in very small rural communities consisting of a few families. But there were also larger more urban-type communities, of which Sana'a was the largest having many synagogues.

This article is based on written and oral sources about synagogue architecture and synagogue objects from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The few visual sources of the architecture consist of the few extent photos of synagogue-interiors taken in Yemen when Jews still lived there in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before most of them left for Israel in 1949/50. No photographs of clearly identifiable synagogue exteriors exist any longer except from Aden<sup>1</sup>. We will not enter the socio-economic organization nor the ritual-liturgical aspects including books, except when these are relevant to the handling and location of the objects.

The information on the ceremonial objects of Yemenite synagogues is mainly based on objects brought to Israel from Yemen by Yemenite immigrants (since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and by European travelers and researchers in Yemen. These objects are now either used in synagogues in Israel, or are part of museum collections, many of them in the Israel Museum. Their shape and material will be analyzed aided by ethnographic interviews of people still born in Yemen, including some craftsmen who made ceremonial objects. Only a limited amount of objects has survived and in many cases we had to rely on oral information alone<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> We did not include in our discussion the synagogues of Aden where various Jewish communities, also of non-Yemenite origin lived. The façade of only one synagogue existed still when I was there in 1999 but it is of a completely different style than we find in the rest of Yemen and is therefore not included here.

<sup>2</sup> For previous publications on the subject by the author, see [Muchawsky-Schnapper 1999: 119–133; 2000: 152–175].

## Yemenite Synagogues

Opinions about when Jews have settled in Yemen are divided. Historical records point to the beginning of the common era but oral traditions go further back in time, some of them even to the time before the destruction of the First Temple in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. [Ahroni 1986: 20–37]. According to oral information, the first Jews settled in a place called Barash on Mount Nuqum near Sana'a in the mid-first millennium before our era and were believed to have lived there until 500 years ago. Eyewitnesses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century report of having still seen the ruins of two synagogues there. The late Rabbi Yosef Qāfiḥ for instance, in a personal communiqué recounted that in 1937 as a young man of about twenty, he went up the mountain and saw there the ruins of a synagogue with large stone-arches and a niche on the northern wall which used to serve as *heykhāl*, in addition to two ritual baths carved out of the rock. He also said that his grandfather Yiḥye Qāfiḥ had told him that in 1882 when he met with the Austrian-Jewish researcher Eduard Glaser, Glaser had reported having found at the same place Jewish inscriptions from the year 900 of the Seleucid Era, or 4349 according to the Jewish calendar, i.e. 589 C.E. indicating as he said, a Jewish presence there at the time<sup>3</sup>.

Various excavations and inscriptions have revealed traces of antique synagogues from the 3<sup>d</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. in southern Yemen [Tobi 2013: 352–354; Tobi 2015: 373–385; Patrich 2011(A): 102–106; Salles & Sedov 2010: 87–122; Robin 2006 (Unpublished manuscript)]. There may have existed many more antique synagogues but due to limited excavations, only a few have been found so far. Already Wendell Phillips mentions in 1950 the ruins of a 4<sup>th</sup> century Jewish synagogue in Ta'izz without however giving any further elaboration [Phillips 1955: 196].

One of the very significant finds from these early periods relating to a synagogue is the discovery in 1970 by Walter W. Müller of a large stone engraved with the names of the twenty-four priestly courses (*mishmarōt*) within a mosque in Bayt al-Hadhir near Tan'im, east of Sana'a, probably stemming from a synagogue as such plaques were in the post-Temple Byzantine period affixed to the synagogue wall as known from several such plaques found in ancient Israel. This proves

<sup>3</sup> Similar oral information was given by informants to Prof. Goitein. See also [Qāfiḥ 1965; Tobi 2013: 353 a; Rathjens 1957: 11, n. 1].

beyond any doubt the presence of a Jewish community and their strong spiritual connection to the Land of Israel and the memory of the Temple [Degen & Müller 1974: 117–123; Levine 2000: 221–222, 496–497]<sup>4</sup>.

But even physical evidence of synagogues of more recent centuries is scarce. There is the example of a 17<sup>th</sup> century mosque which was previously a synagogue. The Zaydi Imam al-Mahdī Aḥmad (1620–1681) turned this synagogue into a mosque in 1680, the Masjid al-Jalā’ (“Mosque of the Expulsion”) after destroying its Torah scrolls and demolishing parts of the building at the time when the Jews from Sana’a and vicinity were expelled in 1679 for the duration of one and a half years to Mawza’ at the Red Sea shore. An inscription on its frieze praises the Imam for expelling the Jews and turning the synagogue into a mosque [Haykel 2003: 118, photo 119; Ahroni 1986: 125–126; Serjeant & Lewcock (1983) 2013: 353–358, 399–400, photos 19.11, 19.12; Chelhod 1984: photo Cl. 8]. The spacious room and rows of ancient columns point to a much more impressive structure than we know from the more recent synagogues in Sana’a’s Jewish quarter (*Gā’ al-Yahūd*) all built only after the Jews’ return from the Mawza’ exile.

Yemenite synagogues (*kanīs*, *knīs* or *kanīsah*) of the 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century were modest, dome-less one-story structures with whitewashed outer walls which identified them from outside as synagogues as reported by informants [Rathjens 1957: 17]. Jewish houses were generally not allowed to exceed the height of Muslim houses, and synagogues had likewise to be lower than the lowest of mosques which were in Yemen often splendid structures flanked by high minarets and preceded by large courtyards. This law is based on the Pact of ‘Umar laws (ca. 637 C.E.) concerning Jews and Christians [Stillman 1979: 157–161; Ahroni 1986: 122]. The old law concerning the limited height of Jewish buildings was vigorously renewed in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rule of the Imam Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn (Imam since 1904, and also ruler since 1918, until 1948) [Sémach 1910: 38–39].

To give an idea about the numbers of synagogues in Sana’a since the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Carsten Niebuhr counted on his visit in Yemen in 1763 14 synagogues of which 12 were demolished a year earlier by the Imam

<sup>4</sup> My thanks go to Prof. Lee. I. Levine as well as Prof. Yosef Tobi for their kind assistance with bibliographic information.

Al-Mahdī ‘Abbās (1748–1775). Reports from Christian missionaries, Joseph Wolff and Henry Aaron Stern mention 18 synagogues in 1836 and 1856 respectively. In 1910, Yomtob Sémach counted 27 synagogues. Erich Brauer received in the early 1930s detailed information about 28 synagogues in Sana’a, of which 4 were large, the rest small. Apparently the Jewish population in Sana’a consisted then of over 8000 souls, more than 10 percent of the general population. An ongoing history of alternating government-induced destructions and closures of synagogues followed by re-openings and re-buildings was reported [Niebuhr (1774) 1997: 416–417, Brauer 1934: 299–307].

The synagogues had all a similar layout, but differed in size and wealth of furnishings. The entrance to the synagogue was usually an unpretentious gate bordering the street, leading some three to ten steps down into one or two adjoining courtyards. This way there was no direct access to the synagogue from the street. The courtyard (*hijreh*) was surrounded by high walls. One to two further steps led down from the courtyard into the synagogue. Thus the synagogue was built partially below ground level, which created a greater sense of height inside while the building from outside, being one storey high, seemed even lower than the rest of the Jewish houses which were limited to 9m height following the Muslim law. At the same time, it complied with the Jewish tradition of building synagogues that were taller than domestic abodes by providing the congregation with the illusion of more space. Simultaneously it allowed to fulfill the promise of Psalm 130: “Out of the depths have I called to thee, O Lord”.

In the courtyard used to be a water well (like also in most Jewish houses) and a stone container which was regularly refilled with water so that the congregants could ritually wash their hands before prayer. It was covered by a stone lid when the place was empty. On one of the high walls of the courtyard were small lockers (ca. 40×40 cm), niches with little doors and locks, where congregants placed their shoes before entering the synagogue. Each man had his own locker, sharing it with his sons and keeping the key at all times. Visitors who didn’t own lockers, left the shoes outside the entrance to the synagogue. The ancient Jewish custom of removing shoes before entering the synagogue may have survived in Yemen because of a parallel Muslim custom of removing shoes before entering a mosque [Havazelet 1995: 13–14]. At the far end of the courtyard was the toilet, furthest away from the prayer-house.

Adjacent to the main room used to be a small room (*tābiq*) for storage of oil necessary for lighting the synagogue's stone oil-lamps hanging on metal chains from the ceiling which were at a later stage replaced by petrol-lamps. Also next to the prayer hall was always at least one study room for small boys.

Although the synagogue had no dome, it was long and broad and needed therefore a row of columns in the centre to hold the wooden beams of the ceiling. As it was built partly below ground, it was desirable to have many windows along the walls in order to let in a maximum amount of light and air. Windows were placed on the southern, western and eastern walls of the synagogue hall while the northern wall — the direction towards Jerusalem — was reserved for the niche holding the Torah scrolls. Windows consisted in Yemen usually of two parts, the upper part being filled with either a pane of alabaster (*qamarīye*) — unique to Yemen — letting in a milky soft light, or of stained glass designed in decorative patterns. This upper part was always closed while the window's lower part was open and had for closure wooden shutters. Varying information exists about the location in the synagogue of 12 additional small round window-openings symbolizing the 12 biblical Hebrew tribes. All agree that they were close under the ceiling. Rabbi Qāfiḥ writes about a division of three windows on each wall while Brauer writes that they were all placed on the northern wall above the *heykhāl*.<sup>5</sup> Some informants reported on the other hand, to remember these round openings only on the eastern, southern and western walls of the synagogue, not on the northern one with the *heykhāl*.

The synagogue's floor was made of plastered gypsum, not stone, and was covered by carpets. The courtyard however had a stone paving.

It happened frequently that synagogues simply occupied the upper light-filled section of a private home donated to the congregation by its owner.

Most synagogues were named after their donor or founder, usually an important rabbi (functioning also as a judge in the community) who had gathered a community around himself. Thus, in Sana'a for example, we find synagogue-names like *Kanīs Bayt al-Usta*, *Kanīs Bayt al-Shaykh* or *Kanīs Bayt al-Badiḥi*, etc.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed description of the Sana'ani synagogue see [Qāfiḥ 1978: 63–65]. About the 12 round window-openings [Qāfiḥ 1965; Brauer 1934: 302].

In rural areas, synagogues were very simple often consisting of only one room in a private home. In villages with less than 10 Jewish adult men (from age 13) necessary to hold public service, prayers were held on a daily basis at home. For Sabbath and holidays, they traveled to the nearby village which had a synagogue. Being very poor, there was at times no fixed furniture in such synagogue-spaces, the Torah scrolls were then kept inside the homes for security reasons but maybe also as an old tradition originating in the Land of Israel (see discussion below).

The general impression was that the interior of synagogues as seen on photos by for instance Hermann Burchardt, Carl Rathjens and Yihye Ḥaybi (Photos 1–7) from the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was modest but with clearly identifying characteristics and a dignified austerity. Characteristic is a niche in the northern wall — the direction of prayer towards Jerusalem — in which the synagogue's Torah scrolls, considered the most important items in the synagogue, were stored.

There were no chairs or benches, unknown in Yemen, but worshippers sat on the floor along the walls, legs crossed in oriental fashion, on a mattress-like cushion (*farsh*) or sheep-skin (*jarm*) spread on large black locally-woven goat-hair carpets (*farā'iq*).



1. Synagogue interior in Sana'a, 1907.

Hermann Burchardt, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



2. Synagogue interior in Rijam, ca. 1930s.  
Yihye H̄aybi, Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.



3. Synagogue interior in Sana'a, ca. 1930s.  
Photo: Carl Rathjens, Vera Bryce Salomons Legacy, Collection of the  
Israel Museum, Jerusalem.



4. Synagogue interior in Sana'a, 1907.

Photo: Hermann Burchardt, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.



5. Interior of Dhamari Synagogue in Sana'a, ca. 1930s.

Photo: Yiḥye Ḥaybi, Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.



6. Interior of Kissār Synagogue in Sana'a, ca. 1930s.

Photo: Yiḥye Ḥaybi, Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.



7. Synagogue interior in Sana'a, ca. 1930s.

Photo: Carl Rathjens, Vera Bryce Salomons Legacy, Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

In small villages, simple palm straw mats (*ḥasīrah*) had to suffice. In the synagogue-walls were niches (*khizāneh*), open or fitted with wooden doors, which served as cupboards and in which the worshippers' prayer books were kept in piled fashion. Each worshipper brought from home two pieces of fabric measuring ca. 50–60 cm, one to be hung on two hooks on the wall behind his seat, the other to sit on. He also provided the cushions (*wusādeh*) on which to lean, and a small bench (*marfa'*) (60×30×40 cm) on which rested the prayer book. The wall hangings and cushions bestowed a bit of color to the otherwise black-and-white synagogue interior with its whitewashed walls and black carpets. Books were a precious rarity and in most cases when studying, especially boys and young men, had to sit around one book. This way, they developed an ability to read the Hebrew text from all sides. All male members of Jewish communities knew thus Hebrew having to learn it from an early age on. (It is the topic for a separate study to discuss the kind of books which were kept in the synagogue.)

As is clear from this description, the Yemenite synagogue was not a luxurious, awe-inspiring place. Subdued and intimate, it served the community members as a place where they could gather daily for communal prayer, study and discussion. But one had also coffee made of spiced coffee-husks (*qishr*) brought from home in coffee-pots (*dalleh*). Smoking was not allowed. A Jewish man passed most of his time in the synagogue which served also as study-hall (Hebrew: *beyt midrāsh*) before and after prayers. In the smaller adjoining room, called *knīs ṣghīre* ("small synagogue"), boys studied from the early age of 3–4 years on. In that small room were often plaster shelves projecting from the walls high above the floor for boys to sit on because of a lack of space. Jewish men and boys would get up in the wee hours of the morning to go to the synagogue, even before breakfast and work, in order to pray and study. Thus the Yemenite synagogue managed to combine an atmosphere of profound spirituality with that of a "cozy clubhouse for men" as defined by Yomtob Sémach, the envoy from the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Sana'a in 1910 [Sémach 1910: 59]. Synagogues were occasionally also used to lodge travelers.

Women had no real place in this kind of environment, although some synagogues had a small separate room built slightly higher than the men's part, with a separate entrance from the court or from the street, in order not to meet the men. This was especially the case with the oldest synagogues of the Jewish quarter such as the synagogue

*Kanīs Bayt al-Shaykh* built in 1681, after the return from Mawza'. Mainly elderly women went to the synagogue, the younger ones being too busy with children and household.

As a rule, on the northern wall, facing Jerusalem, the direction of prayer, was a broad niche built into the wall, a kind of closet, closed by wooden doors, which was called by the Hebrew name *heykhāl* (meaning originally 'Torah ark') in which the Torah scrolls were kept. In western communities, it is known as *aron ha-qodesh* ("cupboard of holy content"). The entrance to the synagogue was therefore mostly on the southern wall facing the northern wall so that the congregant could bow in front of the *heykhāl* when entering the synagogue. The *heykhāl* often filled the wall's entire width and was over 2.5 m high. Below this niche above the floor was a closed space of some 80 cm which served for storage of damaged ritual objects no longer in use (*genīzah*).

The upper section of the *heykhāl* was padded with scarves and divided in two horizontal spaces by a shelf which allowed to store Torah scrolls in two rows, each scroll encased in a wooden box (*tiq*) and placed in upright position<sup>6</sup>.

The number of Torah scrolls owned by the synagogue varied according to the wealth of the synagogue's community. In Sana'a for instance, the largest synagogue *Bayt al-Usta*, had 150 scrolls while smaller ones like *Bayt al-Ḥubāre* had only 20 scrolls [Brauer 1934: 302, n. 1]. Village synagogues had often only very few scrolls which, when not in use, were kept at home. When in Rhayda in 1999 visiting a Jewish family, a large room adjacent to the house was made into a simple synagogue. The Torah scrolls were brought in for service only, otherwise they were kept in a closed cupboard at home for better safeguarding. (Photos 9, 10).

The wooden doors of the *heykhāl*, used to be closed with a typical Yemenite wooden lock-and-bolt. They were said to be in some cases richly carved or even inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Especially mentioned were the *heykhāl* doors of the Sana'a synagogues: *Al-Usta*, *Al-Shaykh* and *Kuḥlāni*. No example has survived. On the few extant photos

<sup>6</sup> It was reported to me that some exceptionally large synagogues in Sana'a had more than one *heykhāl* such as the synagogue *Al-Usta* with five *heykhāl* niches and the *Ṣalāḥ* synagogue with four to store the many Torah scrolls of the synagogue. See also [Gamliel 1982: 20; Nahshon 2000: 42, n. 38]. My thanks go to Dr. Paltiel Giat for much bibliographic information.

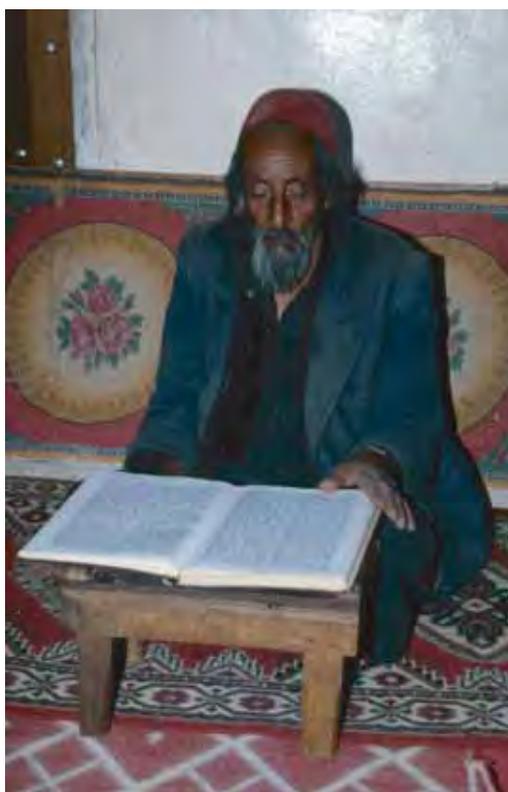


8. Prayer Stand (*tēvah*) in Badīḥī Synagogue in Sana'a, ca.1930s.  
Photo: Yīḥye Ḥaybī, Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.



9. Synagogue interior in Rhayda, 1999.

Photo: The Israel Museum,Jerusalem/Naftali Hilger.



10. Man reading in synagogue in Rhayda, 1999.

Photo: The Israel Museum,Jerusalem/Naftali Hilger.

of synagogue-interiors, one cannot discern any such details but sees clearly the *heykhāl* itself and its doors with typical lock-and-bolt. (Photos 1, 2, 4).

The special curtain drawn over the *heykhāl* was called by the Hebrew term *parokhet* and can be discerned clearly on some of the photos of synagogue interiors (Photos 1, 6, 7). It was made of silk, velvet, or cotton and was always lined. While having varying designs and colors, it had as a rule a border made in a different fabric featuring a geometric pattern of a row of up-ended rhomboid squares (*mshawzag*) in one color on a background of resulting triangles in a contrasting color. The two colors were often red and green. This row is a recurring motif in Yemenite material culture appearing on many Yemenite textiles such as the cloth called *kufyeh* covering the Torah pulpit (*tēvah*) (Photos 2, 4, 6), and on wall hangings (*smadar*) adorning the living room during festive occasions. Other occurrences of this motif on materials other than textiles can be found on house façades, minaret decorations and wooden and silver objects. The frequency of it points to a symbolic significance [Muchawsky-Schnapper 1988: 66–67]. Figurative designs, such as a pair of lions represented on many Ashkenazi Torah curtains, never figured on Yemenite curtains, as, according to oral information, nothing should distract the worshipper's eye when facing the *heykhāl* during prayer. An additional reason for the relative abstinence from figurative motifs on the *parokhet* may also reflect the Jewish and Muslim religious avoidance of figurative imagery. Only one original *parokhet* has survived (Photo 11).

An interesting precedent of the *heykhāl* may have been found in the antique south-eastern port of Qani' (near modern Bir 'Ali) where traces of two synagogues built approximately on top of each other in two stages were excavated. In the older building (3<sup>d</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.) no niche or indication of a direction towards Jerusalem has been found. A Greek graffito inscription in gypsum plaster with a prayer to the Almighty wishing success for a caravan journey, found in this layer, indicates however a possible Jewish origin. In the more recent synagogue on the other hand (end 4<sup>th</sup> to beginning 5<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.) a small rectangular chamber, a kind of an apse, added to its northern wall, the direction towards Jerusalem, has been found. Interpreted by the archaeologists as "Holy of Holies", it may have been an earlier version of the Yemenite *heykhāl* where the Torah scroll was kept [Patrich (A) 2011: 104–105; Sedov 2010: 88, 98, Fig. 38, Fig. 45, Cat. pl. 132



11. Torah curtain (*parokhet*) from village near Sana'a.

Gift of the late Shmuel Badīhī, Jerusalem,

Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem/Avraham Hay.

(Greek inscription), 120–122; Bowersock 2010: 394–396; Patrich (B) 2011: 244–246]<sup>7</sup>.

## Introduction to the ceremonial objects

Jewish Yemenite material culture is usually associated with the better known silver jewelry and garment-embroidery for which Yemenite Jews became famous. The ceremonial objects used in synagogues such as Torah cases, finials, pointers, and pulpits, have received less attention. Much artistic knowledge, great variety and traditional values were however invested in the production of these objects which, unlike in many other Jewish communities, were made in Yemen mostly by Jewish craftsmen. Working as craftsmen in many fields was a professional niche occupied by Yemen's Jews for centuries possibly because being a craftsman was not an especially esteemed occupation by Muslims.

<sup>7</sup> My thanks go to Prof. Patrich for his help with the bibliography.

Much of the ceremonial objects have disappeared as many objects found their way to *genīzah* storage, a closed repository, where old or damaged ceremonial objects and holy scriptures are till this day ritually buried. It is believed that sacred objects no longer in use should be stored away rather than disposed of or re-used for secular purposes. This satisfied also the Yemenites' preference for new and unworn objects which is another reason why not much of the older objects have survived.

## Torah scrolls and their cases

The most sacred and important items in every synagogue are the Torah scrolls. In Yemen they were made of deer or goat hide, tanned in a reddish hue. The outer, top layer of the hide, just below the hair of the animal's skin, called by the Hebrew term *gvil*, served as parchment, an old tradition kept by the Yemenite and a few other oriental communities. Some of the more ancient scrolls were imbued with magic qualities and they were believed to help to bring forth rain or to heal the sick [Brauer 1934: 366–367, 385–386].

Torah scrolls, wrapped in protective scarves, were brought by Yemenite immigrants to Israel, held as carefully as if they were babies. This analogy to the holding of the most precious belonging, a small child, exists also when men are dancing in the synagogue during the Simḥat Torah (“Rejoicing with the Torah”) celebrations at the end of Succoth while holding Torah scrolls and babies in their arms.

Every Torah scroll had its own wooden case (Hebrew: *tiq*). Yemenite Torah cases (Photos 12–15) are always of octagonal shape with a flat top and bottom. They came in varying sizes, being tailor-made for the scrolls they held, the average size being 75 cm high with a diameter of about 30 cm. It is interesting to note that their octagonal shape recalls that of many Yemenite mosque-minarets<sup>8</sup>, a stylistic similarity reflecting a common aesthetic sensitivity. It may be said that in general Yemenite ceremonial objects are characterized by an archaic style reflecting ancient Jewish traditions, combined with stylistic influences from the surrounding Muslim material culture.

<sup>8</sup> For examples of octagonal minarets in Yemen, see [Serjeant & Lewcock (1983) 2013: Figs. 19.18; 19.50; 19.53; 19.64].



12. Torah case and accessories  
from Bayt Baws.  
Gift of Haim Avi'ad and Salem  
Ya'ish Avi'ad , Etz Hayim  
Synagogue, Kfar Saba.  
Photo: The Israel Museum,  
Jerusalem/Avraham Hay.



13. Painted Torah case with finials.  
Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.



14. Painted Torah case from central Yemen.

Private synagogue, Israel.

Photo: Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper.



15. Painted Torah case with finials from the al-Kuḥlānī synagogue in Sana'a. ca. 1845.

Private synagogue, Israel.

Photo: Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper.

The Torah case is composed of two main vertical sections held together with hinges at the back and closed by hooks at the front. They were made of brass or copper and cut into floral and arabesque shapes. Of the case's eight sides, the front one is divided into two vertical panels, while the back one into three. Another typical feature of the Yemenite Torah case is that it has only one elongated slit at the top and not like in other communities, two separate ones for the two staves around which the Torah scroll is bound. They protrude there, topped by finials.

Most of the surviving Torah cases are of unadorned wood, usually *tunub* (*cordia abessinica*) and are covered with a tightly fitted fabric of varying abstract designs. A small number of preserved painted cases point however to a past tradition of wood painting in a range of styles. They are rare because wood painting was no longer practiced in the last generations and only a few cases have survived. Designs and color-combinations are evidence of a high order of artistic ability. Differences of style indicate that different artists must have been at work. While some of the cases display a dense *horror vacui* style, others are characterized by a few dominant designs drawn with swift impressionistic brush strokes. In all cases the designs are organized along each of the eight facets, while each facet is framed by a band of medallions, arabesques, rosettes, rhombi, leaves or flowers. While geometric and floral designs predominate, we found on three Torah cases bird designs. On one such case, one may quite securely identify peacocks with their typical little crown on the head, relatively short legs and a down-curving body ending in an elaborate feather-tail. Moreover, the peacock-motif alternates on this Torah case with the typical peacock feather having thin lines at the bottom and a rich feather bouquet on the top (Photo 14). Obviously the elegant peacock kept for their beauty in wealthy Muslims' gardens are aristocratic enough to figure on a Torah case. Some of the interviewees remembered keeping a peacock in the backyard. It was thus a known species. Another peacock depiction can be seen on a Torah pulpit photographed in the 1930s (discussed below). On a necklace, called *labbeh tuyūr* ("birds necklace") dove-like birds are represented. But also on manuscript illuminations and architectural decorations schematized birds are a favored motif [Muchawsky-Schnapper 1997: Fig. 10; 2000: 178–179; 2004: 181–192]<sup>9</sup>. It is interesting to note that when asked

<sup>9</sup> For architectural decoration, see also: [Scott 1942: 125,128; Bel 1988: 214–217].

about the bird motif, Yemenites often denied recognizing it as such, probably out of a principle opposition towards figurative representations especially on ceremonial objects. This may however be a contemporary reaction which would not have necessarily been the reaction at the time when such motifs were painted.

Torah cases — unlike metal Torah finials — were never signed or dated. The only instance of an approximate date of a Torah case is based on a promissory note with the Seleucid date 2156 and the Hebrew date 5605 (1845) stating the presentation of an extremely fine Torah case, only 50 cm high, to the *Kuhlānī* synagogue in Sana'a until the payment of a debt would be fulfilled<sup>10</sup>. According to oral information the case was then already some 50 years old which would place the date of its creation to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> cent. On its 8 facets, an elaborate flower motif similar to a violet or pansy is painted on a dark red background together with delicate light-green leaves, each facet being framed by a dark frame sprinkled with a small light-colored flower-motif. The top of the frame ends in a *miḥrāb*-shaped arch (Photo 15). It brings to mind the decorative paintings on wood-panels in the elegant homes and palaces of wealthy Muslims, not only in Yemen but also Syria, Turkey and India.

Only one example of a silver-decorated case exists. It stems from the *Al-Kissār* synagogue and was made in 1939–1940 by the silversmiths Yosef Cohen and Rabbi Yosef Qāfiḥ (Photo 6). The lack of other examples combined with oral information to the same effect seems to prove that such silver-adorned cases were highly unusual<sup>11</sup>. The absence of silver decoration on Torah cases in a culture whose silver jewelry was so highly developed, is surprising yet it is not unique. An interesting analogy is the lack of silver Sabbath and Hanukkah lamps which were *de rigueur* in most other Jewish communities. In Yemen such oil lamps were made of stone (Photos 25, 26). They were used in synagogues and at home when lights have to be lit on the eve of the Sabbath and during Hanukkah. Medieval stone Hanukkah lamps from France and Spain support the assumption that Yemenite stone Hanukkah lamps are of

<sup>10</sup> Photo of the promissory note in [Muchawsky-Schnapper 2000: 156].

<sup>11</sup> The late Rabbi Qāfiḥ who used to work as a silversmith when still in Yemen until 1942, told me in one of the many enlightening interviews, for which I will be always grateful, that it was exceptional to make such expensive silver decorations on Torah cases and that this-one was made especially on commission.

the most ancient type and are only paralleled by stone Hanukkah lamps from the Moroccan anti-Atlas region, another relatively isolated region [Muchawsky-Schnapper 1982: 76–83; 2011: CXXXIV–CXXXVII; Narkiss 1980: 187–206; 1988: 7–15; Benjamin 2003: 128–137]. Metal petrol lamps lit the synagogue during week days as can be seen on photographs of synagogue interiors from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Photos 2–5).

Another object that kept an archaic character in Yemen is the *mezūzah* (Heb. lit. “doorpost”) a piece of parchment scroll hand-inscribed with Hebrew verses from the Torah (Deut. 6: 4–9 and 11: 13–21) obligatory to be affixed to the doorjamb of every Jewish home and synagogue. In Yemen it never had a decorated silver container like in many other Jewish communities. The Yemenite *mezūzah* was inserted either directly into a cavity in the doorjamb, or in a tube of reed, or a tube of simple undecorated metal-sheet, all purely functional non-decorative devices of protecting the parchment.

One reason for the near-absence of Yemenite silverwork on Torah cases must have been the great cost of such silver adornment which in turn would have caused the danger of burglary to which synagogues were prone. Another reason may have been not to trigger the wrath of Muslim authorities by displaying too much luxury in their religious devotion. The fact that the Imam Yaḥya (1904–1948) known from many oral interviews to have occasionally inspected synagogues, created the concern that any overt display of material wealth found there, would have aroused his anger.

On the other hand, it is possible that the painting of wooden ceremonial objects was the natural expression of a local aesthetic tradition. Thus, when not flourishing any longer, it was not replaced by other types of ornamentation. The more recent wooden Torah cases are only covered by a tightly fitting fabric.

Another reason for modestly decorated ceremonial objects may have stemmed also from an early local aesthetic expressing the religious preference to convey sobriety rather than pomp. Early Muslim injunctions against exaggerated decorations of mosques and objects in the service of God reflect that concept [Serjeant & Lewcock: 1983: 321b]. One or both of these reasons may also have been responsible for the fact that we don't find any wall decorations in Yemenite synagogues.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The sparse bibliographic sources about an ostrich egg hung in the synagogue [Levy Nachum 1986: 46; Amar 2004: 176] has not been confirmed by interviews

## Torah “garments”

Among the appurtenances belonging to the Torah case are the Torah “garments”, four to five scarves, called by Yemenite Jews by the Hebrew term *mitpahōt* but also by the Arabic term *masarāt*. They padded the *heykhāl* and enveloped the scrolls inside their case for maximum protection. When reading from the Torah, the reader puts one of the scarves to cover the lower part of the hand-written Hebrew script in order not to stain the Holy Scripture with perspiring fingers. The scarves were preferably not made of silk, which was believed to stick to, and thus damage the letters of the scrolls. They were made of variously printed fabrics, often identical to fabrics used for secular purposes, such as scarves worn by women, or scarves used as wall hangings or as bundle kerchiefs for carrying possessions. It was considered a pious deed for women in Yemen (also in other Jewish communities) to donate scarves to the synagogue. This tradition was a way for women — who had otherwise hardly a part in the synagogue service — to express their affection and respect. Once the scarves had been dedicated, they received ceremonial status and were henceforth forbidden to be re-used for non-religious purposes.

Two tight-fitting mantles enveloped the Torah case on the outside, one wrapped on top of the other. The Torah mantle (Photo 12) was called *quftān* meaning in Arabic “man’s coat”, and was frequently made of patchwork of different fabrics, preferably precious material such as velvet in royal blue, bottle green, or wine red, or of gold brocade. Silk patches in pastel hues were at times added. The mantles were fitted with strings bound around the lower part of the case. Each coat was also fastened by hollow silver or brass bells, smooth or in filigree, functioning as buttons when inserted into the sewn-on string-loops. The tender care and protection with which the Torah scrolls were wrapped is again reminiscent of the way babies were bundled up tightly, an analogy mentioned above.

After the Torah case was closed, a long narrow piece of thin fabric, fringed at the narrow ends, called in Hebrew *tallit*, the name of the typical Jewish man’s prayer shawl, was placed on top of the double

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and seems therefore to have been rather rare in contrast to ostrich eggs hung in a room decorated for after-birth receptions of Jewish women in Sana’a and in Muslim tomb-structures and mosques [Muchawsky-Schnapper 1988: 66–69].

mantle-wrapping between the finials [Muchawsky-Schnapper 1994: 114–115]. It is interesting to note the personification of the Torah-accessories through the borrowing of terms referring to male garments. The use of this terminology for holy objects shows a deep sense of identification with them, an affinity and intimacy that characterized the Yemenite Jews' attitude towards their ceremonial objects and towards the synagogue in general.

## Torah finials

Torah finials called by their Hebrew name *rimmōnīm* (“pomegranates”) are metal ornaments placed over the two wooden staves around which the Torah scrolls are bound. The variety of Yemenite finials is often ignored as there is one known type which is preponderant and geographically widespread. It is made of cast brass or repoussé brass-sheet. Consisting of two vertical halves soldered together, its elegant slim form bulges gently into three different, slightly fluted protrusions (Photos 12, 13, 21). Their bulbous shape recalls their namesake “pomegranates” which may be an indication that they reflect an early stage in the stylistic development of Torah finials. *Rimmōnīm* are mentioned for the first time by Maimonides in the 12<sup>th</sup> century but may have an earlier origin in the Byzantine period. A sign pointing to an early origin is that their slim shape fits tightly on the wooden staves reminiscent of the original carved wooden finials. It is believed that at the beginning, the early type of metal finials were still fixed to the wood imitating the original not-separate wooden finials, and that only later they were made to be removable so as to be transferable from one scroll to another [Narkiss 1941: 23; Landsberger 1970: 92–93].

Yemenite Torah finials of this basic type come however in many elaborate variations of material, size, ornamentation and technique. They can be made of brass, silver-plated copper, silver or gilt silver. Their size varies between 17 and 35 cm in height and 2 and 6 cm in width, the average size being 23×3 cm. The gently faceted smooth bulges are separated by variedly shaped sections. Vegetal or geometric designs are at times engraved, punched or made in repoussé technique. Occasionally, the fish motif appears. A decoration made with niello, a black enamel-like inlay called in Yemen *lazz aswad* has been mentioned by Yemenites but must have been rare as none has survived [Qāfiḥ 1982: 89–93].

Less frequent are the very elaborate and luxurious finials made of silver or gilt silver, but having the same basic shape like the common-ones. They feature exceptionally fine filigree and granulation work and carry motifs similar to Yemenite jewelry such as lozenges, discs and seven-dotted granule rosettes. Certain variations of ornamentation consist of vertically applied twisted filigree wires giving the bulges a ribbed impression (Photo 19). Others have little bells on chains attached to the outer circumference of the bulbs. More seldom are inserted semi-precious or colored glass beads.

The craftsmen who made finials tended to specialize in a particular technique (as did jewelry silversmiths) for which they then became famous. The more elaborate and precious pairs of finials are often signed by the craftsman, and at times also with the name of the person who commissioned them, adding a personal dedication. These inscriptions appear always on the finial's shaft. Verses of psalms were also popular inscriptions.

An example of such an elaborate pair of finials is today in the Israel Museum collection (photo 20). Especially large and made of gilt silver, their three typical bulges are made in a less elongated shape. The lower bulge is circular, the central one pear-shaped, and the upper one onion-shaped. Special about them is their dense sharply ribbed pattern. Between the bulges are two flat convex bulbs of smooth metal-sheet with pierced holes through which the inside red and yellow fabric shows. The bulbs consist of two horizontal halves glued together with a green paste still visible where they are joined. The name of the man for whom the pair was commissioned, Hayyim ben Shalom Kissār [d. Sana'a 1918], is pierced on the upper intermediate bulb giving us an approximate date of manufacture. According to oral information, the silversmith was the late Yehudah Ghiyath, famous for his exquisite craftsmanship. Similar finials but not gilt are today in a Jerusalem synagogue. They were made ca. 1944 by 'Azri Ghiyath, a specialist who continued this tradition of finials and was able to give us precious information.

Different from this finial-type are the Torah finials from southern and eastern Yemen. They are composed of one large spherical element on a hollow shaft crowned by a smaller, often onion-shaped knob, with attached chains holding tinkling bells. Examples of such finials are known from Shar'ab (near Ta'izz), Rada'a, Aden and Ḥabbān [Muchawsky-Schnapper 2000: 161 (photo)]. They can be seen on old

photographs of immigrants from these towns on their way to Israel, carrying Torah scrolls with finials in their arms<sup>13</sup>. In these communities, especially in the easternmost Jewish community of Ḥabbān, Jewish silversmiths made also Torah finials besides jewelry. The ornamentation consists mainly of lines, circles, and stylized rosettes. Also here, dedicatory inscriptions and passages from the Book of Psalms are written along the round or faceted shaft. On an especially intricate pair of a 19<sup>th</sup> century finials from Rada'a, the inscription surrounds the main bulb (Photo 17).

A similar type of finials is known from Aden. There the finials were combined with additional smaller finials and an elaborate unique Torah crown (Photo 16) [Cohen Grossman 1976: 34; Raccach-Djivire 1994: 56–57]. The artisans of this elaborate silver crown are not known but may have been Jewish silversmiths from other south-eastern communities like Ḥabbān as they worked in a similar style. These silversmiths traveled long distances in order to sell their products. This however, does not explain the Torah crown with multiple finials typical for Aden, a city-port, subject to foreign influences as it was situated on an important junction on the trade route between East (India) and West (Africa). The origin of this motif has been speculated on variously. It may have been a product of Indian influence brought by the Hindu Banians who had settled in Aden in the sixteenth century and worked there also as silversmiths. A resemblance between the Aden Torah crown and the royal parasol depicted in Indian miniatures is undeniable [Yaniv 1997: 50, ill. 24]<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, looking to the west of Aden, to Africa, we find a great similarity of this Torah crown and the “church-crowns” carried by Ethiopian priests during the Timkat festivities [Helfritz 1972: 107–109]. Ultimately, however, the elaborate Hebrew inscriptions adorning the crowns and the close resemblance of their finials to the other southern Yemenite finials point also to a Yemenite source. A 17<sup>th</sup> century Yemenite manuscript with the drawing of the tree of the ten kabbalistic *sfirōt* by the Yemenite sage Yitzhak Ben Abraham Ouannah (d. 1680) shows a striking similarity

<sup>13</sup> For Shar‘ab finials, see [Zadoc 1967: 112–113, 2 a]. For Ḥabbān and Aden finials, see [Cohen Grossman 1976: 7, 34].

<sup>14</sup> One may wonder why the king's parasol and not the king's crown influenced the Aden Torah crown. For depictions of similarly shaped sacred parasols from Rajasthan art of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see [Rawson 1973: figs. 28 and 51].



16. Torah crown with finials from Aden, Purchased through a donation of the Weisz children, Caracas, in memory of their father, David Weisz. Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem/Peter Lanyi.



17. Silver finials from Rada'a, 19th century. Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem/Nahum Slapak.

to the structure of the Aden Torah crown-cum-finials and may have been a source for inspiration<sup>15</sup>.

It is interesting to see that the shape of Torah finials often echoes architectural elements of the surrounding culture. Just as one can recognize in European finials the shape of church towers and in Moroccan finials elements from mosques in the Maghreb, so are Yemenite finials strongly reminiscent of the finials adorning the minarets of Yemenite mosques [Landsberger 1970: 78–80; Thon 1988: 88–90; Shwartz-Be'eri 1988: 92–93]<sup>16</sup>. As most of the Torah finials, the minaret-finials are also made of brass. The same phenomenon can be observed in Aden where the Torah finials are different from the ones in northern Yemen, but they too are similar to the local minaret-finials.

The ribbed pattern on some finials (Photo 20) may have been inspired by the fluted upper part of some of Sana'a's mosque minarets as for example the 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> cent. Zaydi fluted tomb-cupolas in Sa'dah [Scott 1942: photos 67, 69; Lewcock 1987: photo 200 bottom]. The decorative fluting creates an attractive interplay of light and shade in addition to an element of mysterious depth as it is hinting to a deep inaccessible interior space.

## Torah pointer

Another metal Torah accessory is the pointer used while reading from the Torah to point on what is read without touching the script with the fingers. In most Jewish communities it is called *yad*, the Hebrew word for 'hand', after its hand-shaped tip. Yemenite pointers however, do not feature a hand at their tip. Instead, they taper into a pointed tip and are called *makhwat* meaning "guide" in Arabic (Photo 18). Made of silver or brass, they are thin and angular adorned with geometric designs, such as stripes, dots or rhombi in chased, punched, or engraved technique, and are frequently inscribed with a verse from Psalms, typically verse 8 or 9 from Psalm 19. Little bells were sometimes attached to the upper end of the pointers adding a delicate tinkle to the voice of the person reading from the Torah. When not in use, the pointer was tucked inside the Torah case near the scrolls, which explains why Yemenite pointers lack the chain attached to pointers typical for other communities where they were hung onto the exterior of the Torah case.

<sup>15</sup> See the photograph in [Muchawsky-Schnapper 2000: 163 right].

<sup>16</sup> For Yemenite mosque finials, see photo in [Serjeant & Lewcock 1983: 210].



18. Torah pointer

Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.



19. Torah finials from Sana'a.

Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem/ David Harris.



20. Torah finials from Sana'a.  
Purchased with the help  
of Moshe and Charlotte Green,  
Jerusalem and New  
York, in memory of their  
mothers, Bertha K.Green  
and Helene Apfel.  
Photo: The Israel Museum,  
Jerusalem/ David Harris.



21. Torah finials from Sana'a.  
Photo: The Israel Museum,  
Jerusalem/ David Harris.

## Torah pulpit (*tēvah*)

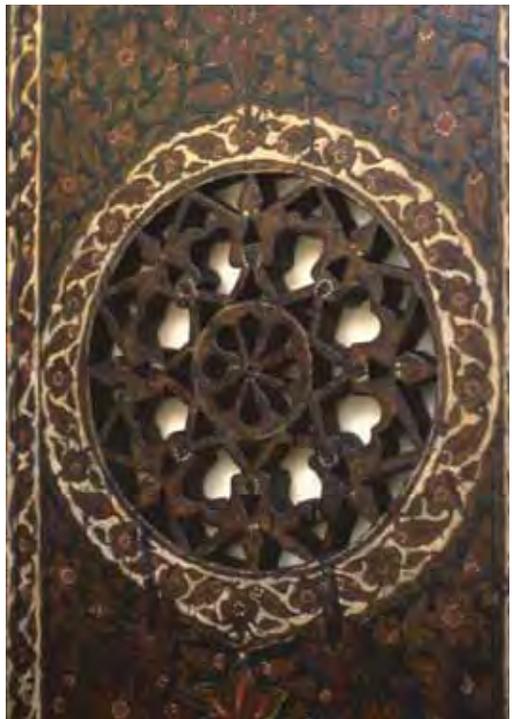
An important object typical for Yemenite synagogues and a kind of highlight in the synagogue was the wooden prayer pulpit called by its Hebrew name *tēvah* [Muchawsky-Schnapper 1997: 67–93]. It is the lectern upon which the Torah scroll is placed four times a week (of which twice on Sabbath) when one reads from the Torah. It is ca. 1 m high, a comfortable height for reading. Nearly square (ca. 30 cm), it has a slightly slanting larger board on top (ca. 70×60 cm) to be able to hold an unrolled Torah scroll in its open case. Its four small peg-like legs are inserted into a simple undecorated wooden square base made of four beams which facilitates the *tēvah* to be moved without damaging it. It is important to note that the *tēvah* was moved each time before the Torah-reading from the right side next to the *heykhāl* where it usually stood, to the centre (Photos 2, 4, 6).

Like the wooden Torah case, the pulpit bears witness to a rich tradition of wood painting and carving executed in diverse styles by artisans of different levels of skill.

The most beautiful specimen of the few samples which have survived belonged to the largest synagogue in Sana'a, *Bayt al-Usta*, named after the master craftsman (*al-usta*) Shalom 'Araqi who built this synagogue a few years after the Jews' return from the Mawza' expulsion (Photo 22, 23). Rabbi Qāfiḥ communicated orally that he believed that this *tēvah* was made even before the expulsion because of its superior craftsmanship. Its previous owners, the 'Araqi family, dated it either to the 1680s, after the return from the expulsion in 1681, or to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The latter date was a more prosperous period and is therefore a more plausible date for the production of such an elaborate object. As it was considered to be a precious heirloom of the past, the family insisted to take it with them to Israel despite its rather large size which made it cumbersome to transport under the hard conditions of the immigration. The al-Usta synagogue had additional pulpits but this one was the most beautiful. The others were cut into pieces and buried as a non-ceremonial secondary use after the Jews' leaving would have been a sacrilege. Now part of the Israel Museum's collection in Jerusalem, it attests to the highest standard of wood carving and painting. Made of *cordia abessinica* wood (*tunub*), it is finely carved on all sides with multiple *mihṛāb*- and rosette shapes, also on its top. The whole surface is delicately lacquer-painted with rich flower designs.



22. Prayer stand (*tēvah*) from the al-Usta synagogue in Sana'a, 18<sup>th</sup> century. Purchased with the help of Florence and Sylvain J. Sternberg, Jerusalem. Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem/ David Harris.



23. Part of Prayer stand (see above). Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem/the Restoration Laboratories.



24. Prayer stand (*tēvah*) from Sana'a, ca. 1900.  
Private synagogue, Israel.  
Photo: Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper.

One is reminded of similar size mosque Qur'an stands (*kursī*) but also of small foldable stands where similar multiple-arched carving designs and lacquer wood-painting reveal a common artistic creativity [Migeon 1927: 71–73, figs. 250, 251; Brosh 1995: 54, ill. 7]<sup>17</sup>. No other Torah pulpit of such fine artistic craftsmanship has survived.

The existence of various styles in the decoration of Torah pulpits can be seen at other examples such as a *tēvah* from around 1900, made by the young artist and later jeweler Mori Yiḥieh al-Abyaḍ which is still in use in a Yemenite synagogue in Jerusalem. It has a much simpler decoration consisting of strongly colored planes and hardly any carvings (Photo 24).

<sup>17</sup> See also photo of Turkish Mosque lectern in [Muchawsky-Schnapper 1997: fig. 15].



25. Hanukkah lamps of stone.  
Rathjens collection on permanent loan by S. Schocken.  
Photo: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem/ David Harris.



26. Sabbath lamp of stone, Sa'dah,  
Rathjens collection on permanent  
loan by S. Schocken.  
Photo: The Israel Museum,  
Jerusalem.

On a photograph made in the 1930s by the local Jewish photographer Yiḥye Ḥaybi (Photo 8)<sup>18</sup> one sees a more recent *tēvah*, which was constructed and painted in 1932 by a Muslim Egyptian craftsman for the high amount of 375 *reals* (Maria Theresa thaler.) Peacocks with their typical feathers and crown are depicted in an imaginary landscape in naïve style. This *tēvah* was especially ordered for the newly built Bet al-Badīḥī synagogue. The photograph gives also the unique visual information about how the reader stands behind the *tēvah* wearing a weekday prayer shawl (*ṭallīt*, *shamlah makhattareh*). He is reading from an open Torah scroll lying inside its open case on the elaborately carved slightly slanting desktop, while facing the *heykhāl*, ergo Jerusalem.

On top of each Torah pulpit was always placed at least one specially fitted cover cloth called *kufyeh*, the name for a male headgear in Yemen (Photos 2 and 6). Meant to protect the often luxuriously decorated top of the lectern, it was made of a thick cloth hanging slightly over the sides, its frame decorated by the typical band of interlocked rhomboid up-ended squares and triangles discussed above, and tassels on the edges.

The Yemenite *tēvah* cannot be considered to be just a regular prayer pulpit because of its specific and exclusive function to hold the Torah scroll during the time of the reading. While reading, the scroll stayed in the opened Torah case lying on the *tēvah*'s desk (not held upright as in other communities). The *tēvah*'s relatively small size was meant for one person only to stand behind. Unlike in other communities and in Yemenite synagogues in modern-day Israel, there was no group of men assembled at a desk fixed on an elevated platform (*bimah*) in the centre of the synagogue. An additional unique feature of the Yemenite *tēvah* is a little built-in bench that can be drawn out for a young boy to stand on, when called up to read from the Torah. To let boys of only 6–7 years of age, i.e. before adulthood (13 y.) read from the Torah as long as they are capable to do so, is an old custom kept only in Yemen. Another old custom kept only in Yemen was for a boy to stand next to the reader and translate the Torah text into Aramaic. Some synagogues had for this young translator (*metargem*) a smaller *tēvah* placed next to the main-one. During Simḥat Torah at the end of Succoth, the Feast of Tabernacles, it was the custom to put 2 pulpits (*tēvôt*) (larger synagogues had more than one *tēvah*) at a distance from each other

<sup>18</sup> For photographs by Yiḥye Ḥaybi, see [Muchawsky-Schnapper 2014].

and cover them with a wooden plank. On it were then placed many Torah scrolls in their cases in upright position as was reported by informants and can be seen on a photo taken in a Sana'a synagogue by Carl Rathjens in the 1930s (Photo 3).

We may assume ancient roots for the Yemenite *tēvah*. In the antique town of Qani' mentioned above, among the finds of the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D. synagogue, was a burnt wooden coffer, interpreted as a wooden *tēvah*, in which the Torah scroll might have been held. It seems to have been wrapped by a drapery (the pulpit cover?) which was burnt as well. Two un-deciphered very short South Arabian inscriptions connected to it have been found, as well as a decoration of schist relief incrustations which were to be attached to the wooden "*tēvah*" by bronze nails<sup>19</sup>. Also in the more recent Yemenite pulpits discussed here, we can see that the wooden parts, especially the top plank, are held together by copper clasps (*maludj*) which may correspond to the nails of the Qani' *tēvah*. Through interviews with Jews from Ḥabbān in south-east Yemen we know that their *tēvah* had copper decorations with Hebrew inscriptions which recall also the Qani' *tēvah*'s incrustations and inscriptions. The fact that the inscriptions on such a ceremonial "holy object" ("*tashmīsh qdūsha*") as the *tēvah* were written in South Arabian and not in Hebrew on the Qani' *tēvah* could be explained as a point in favor of the theory that many members of the Jewish community in Qani' were probably converts who didn't know Hebrew. Although the archaeological finds in Qani' are according to the photos difficult to identify, we saw certain hints pointing to a the discovery of a *tēvah*. In addition, the material itself, namely wood, and the size (app. 60–70 cm) of it are also in accordance with material and size of the more recent Yemenite *tēvōt*.

Another interesting object found in Yemen depicting a kind of a *tēvah* is on a seal stone, a red carnelian, with an intaglio cut image. It was discovered by Paul Yule who gives as a possible dating the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. [Yule 2007: 94–95, Fig. 62]. It is set into a modern-day silver ring by its present Yemeni owner who says to have found the stone in the Himyarite cemetery in Zafar. Surrounded by a Hebrew/

<sup>19</sup> Photo of remains of the "*tēvah*" see [Patrich 2011 (A): 105; Patrich 2011 (B): 245; Salles & Sedov 2010: 104, pl. 65]. For the "*tēvah*" inscriptions — [Salles & Sedov 2010: 114–115, cat. 467–468]. For the bronze nails — [Salles & Sedov 2010: 117, cat. 475–485].

Aramaic inscription engraved in mirror image with “Yitzchak bar Hanina”, it depicts an object of box-shape on short legs, actually very similar to the Yemenite *tēvah*, inside an ark which looks like the entrance to a room. It looks like a smallish movable object which suits the Mishnaic description of a *tēvah* as “*meṭalṭelet*” (Hebr: movable). This iconography reminds the typical Bar Kochba coins (132–135 C.E.), silver tetradrachms of the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt where a similar object is represented but in a more architectural setting interpreted as temple façade, and with different inscription. Another *tēvah*-like object figures on the frieze of the Capernaum synagogue: It is a wagon, maybe the portable Torah shrine, of which one sees the façade, reminding the Yemenite *tēvah*, but also the whole length of its side [Levine 2000: 337, fig. 75].

The Yemenite *tēvah* seems to be a derivation of the Torah shrine / ark from Mishnaic, post-biblical time which was also called *tēvah* meaning “box” or “chest” in Hebrew. This early rabbinic *tēvah* used to be a portable box which contained the Torah scrolls taken into the streets of the town during public feasts (*Mishnah, ta’ānīt 2:1*). It was probably also made of wood and therefore none are left. Kept in a room adjacent to the synagogue, it was brought into the synagogue for reading only. A fixed niche in the wall for keeping the scrolls and a fixed podium from which the Torah was read in the centre of the synagogue were introduced in the Land of Israel only around the 4<sup>th</sup> century of our era. The Yemenite *tēvah*’s size, shape and function, and the lack of a central podium in Yemenite synagogues, reinforces the assumption that Jews were in Yemen before the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Apart from their common name *tēvah*, there are thus also common characteristics which relate the Yemenite *tēvah* to the Mishnaic *tēvah*: the box-like shape more similar to a container than just a stand, the inner space which was always kept symbolically empty in Yemen and was often fitted with a little door to protect its symbolic content, which used to be the Torah scrolls, and — like its old predecessor — the mobility of the Yemenite *tēvah* brought into the synagogue for reading [Levine 2000: 220–223, 320–323, 326, 328; Safrai 1989: 69–84]. That mobility was still the case in some of Yemen’s rural communities as we saw and continued symbolically in larger communities when the *tēvah* stood inside the prayer hall but was moved each time for the Torah reading from the side to the centre. The *heykhāl* niche was probably introduced into Yemenite synagogues later after having been introduced in ancient Israel in the 4<sup>th</sup> century

keeping the movable box-like ancient shape of the *tēvah* and its symbolic significance but reducing its function to a lectern. It was however still considered a holy object in the synagogue, not comparable to just a stand. Proof is that it was believed to be endowed with special powers: On rare occasions, it was taken out of the synagogue under the open sky for prayers to invoke rain or end epidemics<sup>20</sup>. Oral information relates that Jews in Yemen were also asked for help by their Muslim neighbors after a long drought, to bring about rain.

## Conclusion

When analyzing the Yemenite synagogue and its ceremonial objects, they seem relatively modest and austere especially when compared for instance with the lavishness of Yemenite jewelry or embroidery. Reasons for this range from fear of theft to the desire not to provoke the Muslim environment, but also considerations relating to the aesthetics of religious expression, namely a preference to convey sobriety rather than pomp. This attitude can also be noticed in the preference of Yemenite Jews for stone rather than precious metals for their Sabbath and Hanukkah lamps despite their great expertise as silversmiths and in the *mezūzah* made with archaic simplicity of pure textual function without any decorative additions.

Furthermore, a similarity of Jewish ceremonial objects to stylistic elements in the Muslim surrounding supports the idea of a common aesthetic font of stylistic creativity in the work of Jewish and Muslim craftsmen in addition to the individual artistic creativity of each craftsman. We have seen examples in the pervasive octagonal shape of Torah cases and Yemenite mosque-minarets, in the Torah pulpit's decoration recalling the one of mosque lecterns and Qur'an stands, and in the Torah finials and the similar minaret finials on Yemen's mosques.

In a relatively isolated country like Yemen, certain customs remained unchanged for centuries if not millennia, and designs, materials and techniques were handed down from generation to generation

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<sup>20</sup> Ahroni [1986: 153] describes a ceremony practiced by the pseudo-Messiah Yosef 'Abdallah held at the Jewish cemetery in Sana'a around 1888 in order to bring forth rain: The *tēvah* was carried, wrapped in a black sheet, while blowing the shofar. See also [Ratzaby 1958: 207–208].

with little alterations until the modern age. It is therefore safe to assume an ancient typology for many of the objects discussed here, especially as they were used in a religious context, which is inherently more traditional and less open to changes.

The stylistic symbiosis between ancient Jewish roots and artistic inspiration drawn from the Muslim environment may well be the most characteristic trait of Jewish Yemenite ceremonial objects.

Nevertheless we are faced with an incomplete puzzle where many pieces are missing. They would help to define various styles and their development, geographical differentiations and dating. While we are lucky to have some old ceremonial objects, the majority of artifacts were left behind in Yemen, buried with great sorrow before the Jews left to Israel. They were broken before being buried in order to prevent any future desecration by using them for secular functions. Chance has brought to light some of the objects discussed above. Others however, such as finely carved doors of Torah shrines and synagogues and colorful Torah curtains have been irrevocably lost. Their nature can only be guessed at through the nostalgic reminiscences of the oldest members of the Yemenite community.

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