

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles < editor@ascentofsafed.com >
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FORTY CAPTURED TORAH SCROLLS FROM IRAQ

Rabbi Yisrael Gliss¹ was the adviser to Professor Shimon Sheetrit,² the minister of religion, and on the side, he worked as a businessman, entrepreneur, and journalist. Rabbi Gliss heard about a clothing factory in Jordan that manufactured suits for a great price. By purchasing these suits wholesale and reselling them to the religious public, he could turn a nice profit and help *haredim* (Orthodox Jews) by dramatically reducing the price of menswear.

Rabbi Gliss traveled to Jordan, where he visited the factory, bringing along two suits from Israel to use as examples of what he wanted. The factory manager told Rabbi Gliss to come back a week later.

When he returned the next week, Rabbi Gliss saw that the factory had already created a number of suits according to the requested style. He negotiated a good price for them and was going to sign a contract for more with the manufacturer.

As Rabbi Gliss sat there, holding the pen, the manager said he wanted to show him something: he had forty Torah scrolls he was willing to sell for a thousand dollars apiece.

Right then, Rabbi Gliss recalled a story he had heard from his parents, when he was only a young child.

When the Jordanian Legion conquered Jerusalem in the War of Independence,³ Rabbi Gliss's relatives were among the people they captured and took as prisoners. As they were transported to Jordanian territory, the prisoners saw a Jordanian truck stuffed with Torah scrolls.

The scrolls had once been used in synagogues in the Old City, but they were now jammed in a truck, traveling towards Jordan. Realizing Torah scrolls had economic value, someone had decided to take advantage of the situation by pilfering some for later resale.

Rabbi Gliss felt that somehow, he was an important link in the chain of his parents' story and the current one, and he hoped he would participate in closing this circle. He wanted the honor of returning the Torah scrolls to their original homes.

¹ He is today a well-known Israeli journalist

² Sheetrit held the portfolio from 1995 to 1996

³ 1947-1949

Following the factory manager to a side room, Rabbi Gliss watched as he opened a chest and displayed what he had: one Torah scroll, cut by hand into forty pieces. He must have thought that if he presented each of the pieces as an individual Torah scroll, he could get a lot more money.

Rabbi Gliss was in complete shock and distress at seeing a Torah desecrated like that, and making matters worse, it was quite clear that the chopping had taken place recently. He assumed that the factory manager had done it himself.

Rabbi Gliss decided then and there that there would absolutely not be a deal – not with the Torah scrolls and not with the suits. He felt that he could not do business with a dishonest person who so ruthlessly defiled holy Jewish objects.

Rabbi Gliss turned to his contacts in the government and the Mossad, asking if they could ascertain where the factory manager had obtained that Torah scroll. After some research, they told him there really were forty scrolls, and they were available for sale.

More of the story was soon revealed.

During the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein ordered a certain Iraqi air force officer to blow up Baghdad's Great Synagogue.⁴ He thought it would somehow discredit American forces in the eyes of the Jews. The officer visited the site before bombing it to see what was there. He found numerous Torah scrolls inside, which he then removed to a storeroom off-site. Several days later, he blew the synagogue to smithereens.

After the war ended, the officer was obviously not able to return the Torahs to the synagogue. So he decided to do business with them. The Torah scrolls found their way to book dealers – and into the Mossad's purview.

Upon hearing this account, Rabbi Gliss went to Professor Sheetrit, whom he was working for at the Religious Affairs Ministry. He told Sheetrit the whole story, and they approached the ministry's legal team about reclaiming the scrolls. They gave Rabbi Gliss the green light to go ahead and work to bring the scrolls back home.

Rabbi Gliss began making numerous trips to Jordan, bringing Torah scrolls back with him each time. They were the scrolls from synagogues in the Old City, as well as from Babylon (now modern day Iraq). The Torahs were then taken to Machon Ot,⁵ where Rabbi Yitzhak Steiner⁶ carefully and lovingly repaired and restored them.

⁴ The synagogue was one of the oldest in the world and was supposedly so large it could seat 30,000 people

⁵ The world's leading authority in Torah scroll repair, restoration and maintenance. It is located in Jerusalem

⁶ One of the founders of Machon Ot

When Rabbi Gliss finally brought back the last Torah, he went to see *Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv*,⁷ bringing this Torah along with him. Rabbi Elyashiv took the opportunity to examine and learn from the Torah scroll, making observations about the spacing between the lines, the shape of the letters, and more.

Afterwards, Rabbi Gliss took the same Torah scroll to *the Vizhnitzer Rebbe*.⁸ When the rebbe saw the Torah and heard the story of its rescue, along with the other Torah scrolls that had been saved and returned to the Jewish people, he became quite emotional. He wept so much that he needed a towel to dry his tears.

Finally, Rabbi Gliss went to visit **Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu** with the Torah. He hadn't even managed to open it when Rabbi Eliyahu said, "That scroll belonged to Shaul Tzadkah's⁹ family. The Torah was in the *genizah*¹⁰ closet above the ark."

He went on to describe a second Torah scroll that had belonged to the same family, explaining that it had been sitting in the ark itself. He wanted to know where that Torah was, as it was kosher for ritual use. Rabbi Eliyahu knew so much about that Torah, including who had financed it, which scribe wrote it, and other tidbits of its history. But the best was yet to come.

He said there had been a third Torah scroll there, too, which had been written by the **Ben Ish Chai** himself.¹¹ Rabbi Eliyahu mentioned that the Ben Ish Chai had signed the scroll, at the very end, on the back of the last piece of parchment. Rabbi Eliyahu wanted to know if that scroll had been among those that had been rescued – and if so, he wanted to know where it was. Rabbi Gliss promised to do his utmost to find it.

When he investigated the matter, Rabbi Gliss discovered that the scroll in question had indeed been recovered – and that it was currently in the hands of the Mossad. After the Mossad had helped locate and retrieve the Torah scrolls, the security agency had received one of them to use in their synagogue for the weekly readings.

As it turned out, the Torah in the Mossad's synagogue was the very one Rabbi Eliyahu wanted to see: the Ben Ish Chai's scroll. There was just one problem: the Mossad was – and still is – one of the most guarded, enigmatic organizations in the world.

The secret underground base, where the synagogue and Torah scroll were located, is known as "the Hole." No one knows where the Hole is – unless he needs to know.

⁷ 1910-2012. He was one of the foremost rabbis of the generation and was regarded by many Ashkenazi Jews as the world's leading authority on halachah

⁸ Rabbi Moshe Yehoshua Hager, the fifth Vishnitzer Rebbe, lived from 1916 to 2012

⁹ Shaul Tzakhah immigrated to the Land of Israel from Baghdad around 1900. He was the father of Rabbi Yehudah Tzadkah, *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Porat Yosef from 1970-1991 and Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu's uncle.

¹⁰ Written holy words require ritual burial when they are no longer usable. They are kept separate, in *genizah*, until they are ready for burial.

¹¹ The chief rabbi of Bagdad and one of the most important Torah scholars in the world in the latter half of the 19th century. (See also the biographical note that follows the story.)

Rabbi Gliss was able to arrange¹² for Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu to visit the synagogue in the Hole and see the Ben Ish Chai's Torah scroll.

The Mossad agents were delighted by his visit, and the agency's heads even came to greet him. When Rabbi Eliyahu opened the scroll and revealed the Ben Ish Chai's signature, he began to tremble and weep at the sight.

Everyone stood there, dumbstruck – and then joined in Rabbi Eliyahu's tears. They believed that the Ben Ish Chai's soul had guided the Torah scroll to where it needed to be. The head of the Mossad, who was not a demonstrative man, was standing there crying too – unabashed tears of joy and emotion. The Torah scroll was finally home.

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*Source:* Excerpted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from the book, "RABBI MORDECHAI ELIYAHU: A Legend of Humility and Leadership" – which was excerpted from the original 5-volume Hebrew set, which was mainly compiled by *Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu*, who also encouraged the excellent English translation by **Mrs Shira-Yehudit Djalilmand** of Tsfat [Photo from inner.org, courtesy of Wikipedia].

*Biographic notes:*



**HaRav Mordechai-Tzemach Eliyahu** [of blessed memory: 5689 - **25 Sivan** 5770 (1929-2010)], son of Rabbi Salman Eliyahu, a leader of the Sephardic kabbalists in Jerusalem, who also served as the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel from 1983 to 1993. Rabbi Mordechai was a noted sage in all areas of Torah study, as well as a significant kabbalist, and was considered to be one of the leading authorities on Jewish law in Israel. His son, *Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu*, who is currently the popular Chief Rabbi of **Tsfat**, was also the main force in compiling the 5-volume Hebrew set from which the English book cited above was taken.



**Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, the Ben Ish Hai** (27 Av 1834 - 13 Elul 1909), is one of the most important Sephardic Jewish sages in the last two centuries. At the age of 25, he succeeded to his father's rabbinical position and continued in it for 50 years. In 1869 he visited the Holy Land and was offered the position of *Rishon LeZion* (Sephardic Chief Rabbi), but he did not accept. A great scholar and Kabbalist and highly regarded as a pure and holy man, his rulings are adhered to still today by many Sephardim world-wide. He published many important books on Jewish law, Midrash, Kabbalah and Ethics.

*Connection:* The 25th of the Jewish month of Sivan (2023: Tuesday, June 13) is the 13th *yahrzeit* of the former chief Rabbi of Israel, the sage and kabbalist, **Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu**.

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<sup>12</sup> With the help of Rabbi Shmuel Zafrani, Rabbi Eliyahu's personal secretary when he was Chief Rabbi and the rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat HaMeiri in Jerusalem.