The Importance Of The Name “Jacobo”

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TETOUAN

To speak of my father, about whom I never dared writing until now; I must begin with my great-grandfather, and make a special emphasis on his name: Ya’akob Bitton z ”l. My great-grandfather (it is his picture you see photographed here) lived in Tetouan- a small city in the North of Morocco with a significant Jewish population. An official 1861 census reports that out of 11,000 inhabitants in Tetouan, 5,000 or 6,000 were Jewish. (https://avotaynuonline.com/2016/08/jews-tetuan-morocco-genealogy-iconography/). Tetouan’ Jews were direct descendants of those expelled from Spain in 1492. Spanish was the most common language in Tetouan but Jews had also their own Judeo-Spanish dialect: Haketia.

This is what I know about my great-grandfather. He lived in Calle del Tesoro # 2. He had a spices shop next to the market. And whenever someone needed paper to wrap the fish, they would get it from him. He was called “Brother Yaakob Bitton, the good one” (Hermano Yaakob Bitton, el Bueno) an honorific title in the Jewish quarter of Tetouan. Why? Because he was always reciting Tehilim and never spoke unnecessarily. This is all I know of my great-grandfather. Including one more detail: indirectly, he saved my father from assimilation.

SAN MIGUEL DEL MONTE

My grandfather Leon z ”l (Yehuda) was the eldest son of Yaakob Bitton. Born in 1895 he had to go out to work since a young age because poverty in Tetouan had turned into starvation. So

terrible was the situation that at the age of 13 or 14 my grandfather had to travel alone to Argentina to send some money to his family. I don't know how many times he traveled back to Tetouan. But I have the document of his wedding, civil and religious, that took place in Tetouan, in 1916. I believe after that, he never returned to Morocco. My grandfather Leon became a very prosperous businessman. He opened a network of clothing stores in various provinces of the country. And he settled with my grandmother in the city of San Miguel del Monte, a small town more than 100 kilometers away from Buenos Aires.

In that little town, to this day, there is absolutely nothing Jewish. There is no community, no synagogue, no school, no Kashrut. I think my grandfather was the only Jew in the entire town.

My father grew up there, and in his childhood, he never saw a mezuza in his house, he never ate Kosher, never learned Hebrew, never even heard a Kiddush. My grandfather's legacy to my father were his Berit Mila and his name.

In the 1940s my grandfather became very wealthy and was the only person in his small town to own a car and a driver. My grandparents my father and his siblings lived and dressed like millionaires and were the celebrities of San Miguel del Monte.

LANGUAGE, ECONOMY, AND ASSIMILATION

My grandfather represented those thousands of Jews who, for mainly economic reasons, decided to live their lives on their own, with no Jewish community life. I am reminded of the differences between my paternal grandfather and my maternal grandfather, Abraham Faur, z "l, who arrived from Damascus, Syria, around the same time, 1915. The most notable "advantage" my paternal grandfather had was that he spoke Spanish. And that advantage gave him access to business

opportunities anywhere in the then rich country. But this "advantage" also precipitated his assimilation. My maternal grandfather, on the other hand, did NOT speak Spanish, only Arabic. And like 99% of the Syrian Jews who arrived in Buenos Aires, he settled in Barracas, near the port. He went through hardship and financial difficulties but always lived with the community, with other Jews like him, supporting each other.

What saved my grandfather from assimilation?

I believe that what saved my grandfather's family from total assimilation was that his employees cheated on him and took all his businesses. My grandfather was literally left with nothing but debts. And he had to go to Buenos Aires in search of business opportunities and start from scratch. He never recovered his wealth but, providentially, my grandfather's financial ruin brought my father closer to the Jewish community.

WHAT'S IN A JEWISH NAME?

What saved my father from assimilation?

The most important factor that kept my father's Jewish identity alive was his name, "Jacobo". In Argentina, only a Jew could be named "Jacobo". My father told me that throughout his childhood and adolescence, all he wanted was to be like everyone else but his name gave his religion away. Because of his Jewish name he suffered mocking, bullying and hatred. He tried to change his name and begged his friends to call him "Juan Carlos", but he did not succeed. At school or at work everyone kept calling him, "Jacobo", laughing, reminding him that he was a Jew. When he arrived in Buenos Aires, he had no choice but to connect socially with the only people who were not going to bully him because of his name: his Jewish "brothers". And one night, at a community party in Barracas he met my mom. And the rest is history.

The Sages explained that what kept the Jews from assimilating

into Egyptian society, particularly in times of prosperity, was that the Israelites consciously preserved their language, their clothes, and their names, a lesson I will never forget.

In memory of my father, □□□□□ □□ □□□□, in the day of his anniversary