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The Grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī in Yemen

By *Aharon Gaimani**

Abstract

Rabbi Shalom Shabazī, who lived in the seventeenth century, is the most esteemed figure among all Yemenite Jewry of all times. The article presents the impressions of people who came to Yemen and wrote about Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave.

We have actual testimonies about R. Sh. Shabazī's gravesite from the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1830s it was destroyed and the gravestone over the grave was rebuilt, while the gravesite was encompassed by an open-roof stone structure. In the 1980s the grave was destroyed, and in the past generation unsuccessful attempts were made to rebuild and refurbish the gravesite and the grave itself.

Also mentioned are fresh attempts toward bringing Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's remains to Israel for re-interment there. After the destruction of the gravesite, however, the precise location of the rabbi's burial place is not clear, so this endeavour cannot be carried out.

Introduction

Rabbi Shalom b. Yosef Shabazī / Sālim aš-Šabazī (שלום שבזי / سالم الشبزي; 1619-c. 1720) is the most esteemed figure among Yemenite Jews, and the great admiration he received exceeded his place and time. In this article, I shall present the impressions of people who came to Yemen and wrote about the tomb of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī, whether from their own experiences at the site or from what they heard. I shall cite a testimony about the destruction of the gravesite in Ta'izz that occurred after the end of the Yemenite Diaspora and about the attempts to put up a gravestone at the location. In the ensuing, I shall bring new reports about the attempts to bring the rabbi's remains to the Land of Israel for re-interment.

1. The Grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī

Customarily, the Jews of Yemen did not erect a tombstone over a grave nor indicate the name of the deceased; a pile of stones placed on the gravesite marked the grave.¹ Over time, owing to the general custom, it was no longer

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1 My father Slayman (Shlomo) also told me about the burial customs where my family lived in the community of Gaymān in central Yemen. R. Yosef Raḍa

possible to identify an average person's grave. Moreover, it was not common to go out to visit relatives' graves, and people did not usually make pilgrimages to graves of צדיקים (*ṣaddiqim*; saints) or designate a special section for their burial.² For example, we can learn of the custom of Yemenite Jews from the fact that even to the grave of such a famous חכם (*Hakham*) as Rabbi Yiḥye Ṣāliḥ (Mahariṣ),³ who died in Ṣan'ā' in 1805 and was held in high esteem by many Jews in Yemen, from his times to this day visits were not made; even the grave's location was not known by the Jews of Yemen in the generation prior to the end of its Exile, which extended to the mid-twentieth century.⁴ Even the grave of the נשיא (*nasi*; community dignitary)

provided similar information about the customs in Ḥujariyya in southern Yemen, "And after him came his son Rabbi Ḥassan Yusef, of blessed memory, and he died at an old age of some 80 years. Of course, they do not put up a tombstone for the deceased, but rather they put together large stones around the grave. But if the deceased was a צדיק (*ṣaddiq*), they added another row of stones to the usual one" (YOSEF RAḌA, מבוא לארץ אלחוגריה, ed. by EFRAIM YA'AQOV (Jerusalem 1995), pp. 139-40. In recent generations, some people in the Ṣan'ā' community did build a dome-shaped gravestone over the grave; see MOSHE ZADOQ, יהודי תימן (Tel Aviv 1983), p. 218. At times, in Ṣan'ā', people would inscribe the name of the deceased on a small stone over the tombstone.

2 In Yemen, it was not customary to visit family members' graves on the thirtieth day after the death nor on its anniversary, though there were some who did go there on the seventh day; see Rabbi PINḤAS QORAH, בית מועד, vol. 2 (Benei Brak 2000), ch. 49, par. 2, p. 378. On assigning a special plot for burial of rabbis, Rabbi Yosef Qafiḥ wrote, "In the past, there was a custom in a number of places to designate for each family a family burial plot (bKet. 84a), and all family members were buried there, without exception – at least, we never heard of any –, and there are no traces in the Sages' works that in family burial plots, they distinguished between a *ṣaddiq* and a non-*ṣaddiq*, and they did not differentiate, of course, between a *Hakham* and an ordinary person, or between someone with the title of rabbi and someone without that status, and this is, how it was in Yemen: they even did not make sure at all to bury a husband next to his wife or a wife next to her husband, a son next to his father or a father next to a son, since these things were not the rule among them, and no one thought about doing so. They didn't even set apart a section for burial of *ṣaddiqim*, and others, let alone for non-*ṣaddiqim*, since it says about everyone 'Your people also shall be all righteous' (Isa. 60:21). Of course, they did not differentiate between one rabbi and another, as is done in a few communities, to set aside a 'plot for rabbis,' as if the rabbis were *ṣaddiqim*." See his article, "הליכות עולם: על מנהגי יהודי תימן," in: YOSEF QAFIḤ, כתבים, vol. 2 (Jerusalem 1989), pp. 923-24.

3 For details about him and his endeavour, see AHARON GAIMANI, "שטר הצוואה," השלם של רבי יחיאל צאלח (מהרי"ץ) 102 פעמים (2005), pp. 129-45.

4 As heard from Rabbi Pinḥas Qorah, Benei Brak.

Shalom Hakohen 'Erāqi, known by the byname of al-'Ūṣṭā', who was very well liked by the Yemenite Jews and who died in Ṣan'ā' in the 1780s,⁵ was not visited by Jews of Yemen; the place of his grave site was also unknown in the last generation of the Exile.⁶



a) Oral Descriptions

The traveller to Yemen Rabbi Ya'aqov Sappir (1822-1886), who set out on behalf of the Jerusalem community to collect contributions and stayed in Yemen in 1859, wanted to visit Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave but the dangers of the journey made him abandon his plans. He wrote about this from what he heard:

5 For details about him and his activities, see AHARON GAIMANI, "מקורות חדשים", "לפועלו של ר' שלום עראקי בקהילות תימן במאה הי"ח" in: *פעמים* 55 (1993), pp. 134-44.

6 Heard from Rabbi Yosef Hakohen 'Eraqi, Benei Brak.

At his gravesite is a large marker and a cave next to it and a pool of water (מקוה *mikveh*), with a prayer room and a Torah scroll written by him. Over his grave shines a נר תמיד (*ner tamid*) [perpetual flame]. Most of the vows in the entire country are in the name of this wonder maker and his prayer room. And all the Jews living in this small town make their living from this. The reputation of Mori Sālim al Shibazi is revered also by the non-Jews because of a certain incident, and they swear by his name. Any Yemenite Jew who is suffering an illness or any bad happening, if he has the strength to go there (since it is not easy to get there), will put his life at risk to go out there to pray at his grave. And I inquired well from people who have been there, and they told me great things (as related by them), saying, if the ill person is God-fearing and believes in this wonder maker, after they have prostrated themselves on his grave, they will enter the cave to wash and take some of the water. If he will merit a cure, running water will greet him, on the burbling water, he will see an amulet, a plant leaf, and he will accept it joyously, and be restored to health. And whoever is not God-fearing and does not warrant a cure, will find a dry spring bed, with no water, only a snake curled at the opening, and as he came so, he will leave.⁷

The Kushta [Constantinople] merchant Shmuel Carasso, who spent years in Yemen in the 1870s, visited Ta'izz but did not go out to the grave of R. Sh. Shabazī. He wrote that the site serves as a target for Jews and Muslims:

In this city is a grave called the *Ziyāra of Mori Sālim Al-Shabazī*. This rabbi is buried up on a mountain and the gravesite has a beautiful dome [...]. Every person who visits it comes back satisfied as to his request. He cures affliction, responds to the visitors' wishes, finds succour for their illnesses and so on. People come to this tomb from all over the country, and I even saw that they make pilgrimages to the grave from a distance of ten days, Jews and Arabs. This location is visited constantly. I heard from many Arabs and Turks who came and left satisfied. They told me many things and among others, they even told me that there are people who go to the grave but are unable to enter, and fear strikes them. So how do people enter the site? First, they wash themselves and then go in. Some cannot enter at all, even if they came from far away, they return in the same state as they came. They come back another time, up to three tries. Some people tried boldly to enter but they fell and died. There are many other wondrous stories of this type. I heard all of this from many people, Arabs as well as Jews. People who had been ill for a lengthy period, both Arabs and Jews, have nothing else to do but to make a pilgrimage to Shabazī's gravesite. They spend a great deal of money on this journey.⁸

7 Rabbi YA'AQOV SAPPUR, אבן ספיר, vol. 1, Lyck 5626 [1866], p. 82b.

8 "מסע לד"ש קרסו," in: JOSEPH TOBI, תולדות ומקורות - במאה ה-19 (Tel Aviv 1979), pp. 149-50.

In the ensuing, Carasso described three instances of cures after visiting Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave as heard from people he met in the Jewish communities of 'Imrān and Shibām, a ten days' journey on foot distant from the site. He tells about the legs of Ya'ish Jizfan, one of the leaders of the local Jewish community, that had been afflicted and afterwards cured, and Carasso met him in 'Imrān. The wife of a Jew named Salim Al-Sheikh had been barren for 14 years, and she became pregnant and gave birth to a son; the son of an Arab, whose name was Sayyid Al-Qasam and who lived in Shibām, had been insane and restored to health.⁹

The emissary of *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (AIU), Yom Tov Zemaḥ, spent some time in Yemen in 1910; his mission was to collect information about the education situation among Yemenite Jewry so that possibilities for assistance from the AIU could be considered. About pilgrimages to the grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī he wrote,

The year round, but especially on Shavu'ot,¹⁰ Shabazī's grave attracts many Jews, who come from every far-flung place in Yemen to prostrate themselves on it, they and their wives and children; all of them dip in its מקוה (*mikveh*), make donations, take on vows and contributions. The ill become better of here and the feeble become healthy. Barren women are assured of having children, and implanted in the heart of every unfortunate and work-weary person is the hope that their ills will disappear. Those who prostrate themselves on the holy grave of R. Shabazī return full of hope and initiative, and happily undertake the tribulations of marching along narrow pathways and knobby mountains, from Ta'izz to the north of the desert, and from the east to their destination a twenty- or thirty-day march. And if after the visitor's return, he has found no relief for his illness and his condition remains unchanged, it is not the saint who is responsible but rather the blame goes to

9 TOBI, 19-המאה במאה (note 8 above), pp. 150-51. There are testimonies among the Jews of Yemen about Muslims who visited the grave of R. Sh. Shabazī. See: SHMUEL YAVNEELI, מסע לתימן (Tel Aviv 1952), p. 142; Rabbi AVRAHAM AL-NADDĀF, "לתולדות המשורר התימני ר' שלם ב"ר יוסף שבזי ושירתו העברית," in: 1 מזרח ומערב (Sivan-Elul 1920), 330; Rabbi GILAD ZADOK, לבניכם ספרו (Benei Brak 2000), p. 124; Rabbi SA'ADIA HOZEH, ספר תולדות הרב שלום שבזי ומנהגי יהדות, שרעב בתימן ספר גלות תימן, קורא הדורות vol. 1 (Jerusalem 1983), pp. 44-45; Rabbi AVNER 'AFJIN, אבא שלום שבזי נעים זמירות ישראל (Rosh Ha'ayin 1994), pp. 400-405, 409-12. R. Shalom b. Shelomo 'Uzayri of Ramat Gan related that when he had stayed at the grave site in the 1940s, he had seen an Arab woman washing her son in the waters that were near the grave so as to effect a cure.

10 Of the three pilgrimage holidays, Shavu'ot is the most convenient for going out to graves, since there is no limitation of a Sukkah and the Four Species of Sukkot nor the interdiction against leavened food as on Passover.

him: the ailing person is not worthy of the loving-kindness of the *ṣaddiq* Shabazī.¹¹

These three, who told about the grave did not visit the site but described it according to from what they heard. They wrote positively about going out to Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave site: people come from great distances to visit it; the pilgrims to the tomb are rewarded with succour; even though some are not helped, because they are not worthy of it. Whereas Sappir and Carasso related that Jews and non-Jews come to the grave, Zemah mentioned the Jews only who go there. Sappir and Carasso noted that there is a structure over the grave, and Carasso added that there was a dome over it. Sappir alone wrote about the cave with the spring near the site of the grave and remarked that for anyone whose prayer will be heard, and who would be cured, the water in the cave would rise up in greeting, and he would find on the water something the supplicant could use as an amulet.

The phenomenon of the water rising toward a person whose prayer had been accepted at Shabazī's grave was also noted by Rabbi Yiḥye Qoraḥ, one of the Sages of Ṣan'ā' in the second half of the nineteenth century. In his commentary *משכיל דורש* (*Maskil Doresh*), in a discussion about the servant of Abraham, who saw the water rising up toward Rebecca, he wrote (apparently, from what he had heard),

As to the phenomenon well known in our time about the spring near the grave of the Rabbi, the Ḥasid, the divine Rabbi Shalom Shabazī, may his merit protect us, that those who go to the fount of water of the noted rabbi, whoever suffers some illness or any other trouble, [in order to] bathe in it. And for anyone, whose prayer has been answered, the waters rise up to greet him, so that a great amount of water suddenly gushes from the spring until it covers half or more of his body, and this is a sign for him that he will be cured, and he then goes out from the water in joy and with the consolation of salvation. But also just the opposite for anyone whose prayer was not accepted; when he entered the spring there was only burbling water as usual. Similar to the matter with the Patriarch for whom the water would rise up as a miracle and a sign, for they increase plenitude in the world and that they are worthy of great good without any effort.¹²

11 YOM TOB SEMACH, "Une mission de l'Alliance au Yemen," in: *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, 1911, p. 101 [Avraham Almalih (trans.), "מסע יום טוב צמח לתימן," in: YISRAEL YESHAYAHU and AHARON ZADOK (eds.), *שבועות תימן* (Tel Aviv 1945), p. 309].

12 Rabbi YIḤYE QORAḤ, *משכיל דורש על התורה* (Tel Aviv 1964), p. 56.

b) Descriptions by Eyewitnesses

Rabbi Avraham al-Naddāf (1866-1940), one of the prominent Yemenite Sages of the twentieth century, visited the gravesite of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī. He emigrated from Ṣanʿāʾ to Jerusalem in 1891. Twice, in 1895 and in 1900, he went back to Yemen to visit communities there, to collect contributions for the Yemenite עולים (*olim*; immigrants) in Jerusalem, to sell the תכלל (*Tikhlal*), the prayer book according to the Yemenite rite, and the תאג' (*Tāj*) – the Pentateuch, also containing *Targum Onkelos* and the תפשיר (*Tafsīr*; commentary) by Rabbi Saʿadia Gaon (892-942), that he had printed in Jerusalem.¹³ He commented about the statements by Sappir, who wrote that there was candle burning over the grave, as follows,

I am an eyewitness, having been to the grave twice. I only saw a lit candle in its prayer room, but nothing over his grave. Moreover, it is impossible to have a kindled light there owing to the wind, since it has no dome or shelter. Perhaps, the candle just happened to be there by chance at the time Yaʿaqov Sappir visited, and he thought that one was always burning there.¹⁴

From Rabbi al-Naddāf's report, we learn that there was no structure over the grave as Rabbi Sappir had said and like the words of the merchant Carasso, who even noted that there was a dome over the structure. Perhaps from what Sappir and Carasso heard in descriptions about structures in the area of the grave, they also depicted R. Shabazī's grave, the same way that there was usually a special structure at the site of a saint's grave marker.

Of further note is that in the stories (from a primary or secondary source) of those who visited the grave there is a prominent tendency to provide lively descriptions of the spring in the cave near the grave site, while the grave itself scarcely earns a concrete description. Only in a few testimonies do we find any kind of description: At the start of 1920, when he was five years old, Shalom Medina set out, with his father Moshe, from Ṣanʿāʾ to Aden. On their way, they visited the grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī, and he was surprised by the simplicity of the structure at the side, which did not match the image ostensibly befitting a building at the grave of such a distinguished figure as Rabbi Shalom Shabazī. About the edifice at the grave, he wrote,

13 YEHUDA RATZHABY, "שליחות ר' אברהם נדף זצ"ל לתימן," in: 2 ממזרח ומערב (1980), pp. 87-120.

14 See AL-NADDĀF, "לתולדות המשורר התימני ר' שלם שבזי," (note 9 above), p. 130. DAVID DAVID, who immigrated to Israel in early 1949, wrote about burning candles that were on the gravestone. See his book דרך גאולים: מהרי גדם להרי ירושלים (Tel Aviv 1998), p. 69.

The grave was built out of stones taken from a stream, heaped one atop another, about six *amot* high; it had an opening through which visitors would enter a small chamber and light candles; the grave site's courtyard was surrounded by a low wall comprised of stones similar to those of the graves.”¹⁵

In a novel written by Nissim Binyamin Gamlieli about his life in Yemen, he described his actual visit to the Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave, when he was still a young man. He had heard stories about attempts been made to build a magnificent tomb for the rabbi, but they came to naught because Rabbi Shalom Shabazī wanted a modest grave. Thus, when he visited it he was astonished by its size and height and shape; and he noted that the tomb was fairly new. In addition to that, he tells us that the tombstone had at its top, a marble sign with the caption stating that this was the tomb of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī; he also noted that around the body of the monument there were small niches into which a person could put a hand.¹⁶ And the British scholar Hugh Scott wrote about the grave,

We passed the tomb of a Jewish saint, *Weli shebazi*. The actual grave, a white-washed oblong with a little arch on top at one end, was surrounded by a rough stone-wall with a small low one-roomed stone building opening into the enclosure.¹⁷

Dr. Yehuda Amir wrote about his visit to the grave in 1949,

[The guide] led us up the mountainside, on which the grave was located. We were quite excited and not bothered by the ascent to the tomb marker. We arrived and found a burbling stream flowing from the mountainside and next to it a raised stone structure indicating the grave.”¹⁸

c) *The Tombstone over the Grave*

As for the tombstone over the grave, it is told that Aḥmad the son of the Imam Yiḥye, who belonged to the Islamic trend that opposed worship ceremonies at graves, destroyed the gravestones of Muslim saints in southern

15 SHALOM MEDINA, -1905, ואתיופיה, תימן, מצרים, ישראל, מבניו בארץ ישראל, 1934 (Tel Aviv 1995), p. 40. On their making their way from Ṣan‘ā’ up to Aden, see *ibid.* pp. 28-47. Shalom immigrated to the Land of Israel in 1935; see *ibid.* pp. 212-13.

16 See NISSIM BINYAMIN GAMLIELI, רומן אוטוביוגרפי מחייו של ילד, תחת כנפיה של אמא - (Tel Aviv 2002), pp. 269-70.

17 HUGH SCOTT, *In the High Yemen* (London 1942), p. 92. See also REUBEN AHRONI, *Yemenite Jewry* (Bloomington 1986), p. 99; REUBEN AHRONI, “A Petition (‘Baqqaša’) Addressed to Rabbi Shalom Shabazī: A Yemenite Jewish Saint,” in: *Hebrew Annual Review*, 9 (1985), pp. 5-30, esp. p. 12.

18 His letter is dated 15.02.2007.

Yemen, and in 1930, he also destroyed the tombstone over R. Shabazī's grave though the structure over it was rebuilt in 1935.¹⁹ Rabbi Ḥayim Sinwani, one of the greatest sages of Yemen, lived in the period under discussion in the town of Sinwān, which is located in the area of R. Shabazī's grave; he wrote, On Sabbath eve, 17 Shevat in the year 5690 to the Creation [15.02.1930], the tombstone of the Admor Abba Shalem Shabazī, may his merit protect us, Amen, was smashed by the tribe of the oppressor due to our many iniquities.

I shall bring here a tale that I remember:²⁰

In 1935, [the tomb] was rebuilt by permission of the oppressor himself, that is, the king of Yemen, Aḥmad bin Yiḥye, since he had ordered to break it to bits because of an informer. For at that time, when he was still the minister of the army during his father's lifetime, he was furious about all the large tombstones of the idols of Yemen, for a reason known at that time.²¹ And the Arabs also informed against the tombstone of the Admor Shalem Shabazī, of blessed memory, and they smashed it on Sabbath eve, since they knew that the Jews rested quietly on Friday night, and if they would do it on Friday, the Jews might disturb them so they decided upon Sabbath night.

Afterwards, Aḥmad himself commanded to [re]build it, due to events that occurred.²² And a larger, more magnificent building than the first was constructed. Now that this king chose Ta'izz as the seat of his kingdom, he treats with great respect the tombstone of Admor R. Shalem Shabazī, may his merit protect us, Amen, as the Jews of Yemen know.²³

Pilgrims to the grave in the 1940s, as well as עולים (*olim*) during the "On the Wings of Eagles" operation 1949–1950, who visited the grave, attested to

19 See RAḌA, מבוא לארץ אלחוגריה (note 1 above), pp. 64–67.

20 The Hebrew text reads את"א זכירה for "I shall bring," as in bRH 11a and bMeg 18a. Here it apparently means as translated, "I shall bring here a tale that I remember."

21 Found not far from Ta'izz is the grave of the Muslim saint known by the name of Ibn 'Alwan. There are a number of traditions about the allusion to what led to the destruction of the grave of Ibn Alwan and of graves of other saints. For the statements of R. Yosef Raḏa, see RAḌA, מבוא לארץ אלחוגריה (note 1 above), pp. 64–66. For the statement of Rabbi Shalom ben Zekharya Najjar, see the book by Rabbi HOZEH, תולדות הרב שלום שבזי (note 9 above), p. 44; for the statement of Rabbi HOZEH, *ibid.* p. 40; and for the statement of Rabbi Raẓon ben Yosef, *ibid.* p. 45.

22 It is not clear to what these allusions refer but there is a tradition that Aḥmad suffered a stroke. See RAḌA, מבוא לארץ אלחוגריה (note 1 above), p. 67 n. 23.

23 RAḌA, מבוא לארץ אלחוגריה (note 1 above), p. 67 n. 24. For another version of the story of the destruction of the tombstones of saints in southern Yemen by the Imam Aḥmad, see Rabbi HOZEH, תולדות הרב שלום שבזי (note 9 above), p. 45.

there being a tombstone over R. Shabazī's grave and confirmed that it is surrounded by a structure without a roof.²⁴

2. The Grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī in the Last Generation

a) Recent Testimony about the Condition of the Gravesite

The Jews who lived in Ta'izz, the site of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's interment, as well as in other places in the vicinity, immigrated to Israel at the end of the 1940s; Jews remained mainly in northern Yemen. That meant that Rabbi Shabazī's grave was cut off from the area of the people to whom it was held dear, and from then on we do not have a continuous source of information about the condition of the grave.

The MK Rabbi Menahem Hacohen raised the issue of Rabbi Shabazī's gravesite in the Knesset on 21 December 1977. He related that there was information about desecration of the grave.²⁵ Responding in the name of government, Minister of Religious Affairs Aharon Abuhatzzeira said regarding the grave,

On July 4th of this year, at our request, the ambassador of a friendly state travelled in the region and noted that it seemed to him that the cemetery in Ta'izz had been destroyed, and that on the site different types of infrastructure related work have been carried out, but he did not make a firm declaration that Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave was desecrated.²⁶

In Shevat 5739 (1979), Shim'on Jeraydī, who had been an Israeli Knesset member from 1951 to 1955, sent a notice to the press in which he complained that precise information about the state of the grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī was lacking.²⁷

On 27 December 1981, an academic conference was held in Jerusalem. In the collection of studies presented by the speakers at the meeting, Yosef Sha'ar (who in times past had written the Bible contest questions), wrote in his article,

24 For a photo of the structure over R. Shabazī's grave, along with an explanation, see SHIM'ON JERAYDI, 1993-1933 ג' - תשנ"ג - תרצ"ג, עריכה, הדפסה, תרצ"ג - תשנ"ג (Tel Aviv 1995), p. 158. This picture was printed in various sources. See, for example, Rabbi 'AMRAM QORAH, סערת תימן (Jerusalem 1954), p. 106; ḤAYIM ZADOQ, מן המיצר: אגרות, תעודות ומכתבים (Jerusalem 1989), p. 5.

25 דברי הכנסת, Ninth Knesset, sessions 56-58, second session, 10, Agenda Proposal: "The need for political action to bring the remains of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī for re-interment in Israel," pp. 841-42.

26 Ibid. p. 842.

27 JERAYDI, ימים ידברו (note 24 above), p. 105.

A few years ago, rumours spread in Israel and the Diaspora, that the grave of the saint Rabbi Shalem Shabazī in Ta'izz had been desecrated. People were greatly agitated, and a public committee arose that worked toward bringing his remains to Israel. A while later the rumours were proven false, and it turned out that no one had dared to damage the grave since it was also considered holy by the Muslims. One of the letters, that has recently reached Israel, tells that "We in the Diaspora are praying for the Redemption of our holy Messiah, and at all times we are prostrating ourselves on the grave of our Teacher and Rabbi Salem Shabazī, of blessed memory".²⁸

In the continuation, Yosef Sha'ar presented testimony that he had heard in September 1983 from Terrell Dwayne, an American who had visited Yemen at the end of 1979. Sha'ar wrote,

Mr. Dwayne reached Jabal Ṣabīr which is in Ta'izz, saw the grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī, of blessed memory, which is located next to a spring, and he prayed near it. The Muslims call it – "The grave of the great Prophet."²⁹

On 28 July 1990, Prof. Ḥayim Tawil of New York sent a telegram to the Yemeni foreign minister, Dr. Iriyani, and a telegram to the mayor of Ta'izz, 'Abdu Nu'man, saying that information had been received from Ta'izz speaking about the building of a school over the grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī, and asking to intervene to prevent destruction of the grave, since it was sacred to all citizens of Yemen.³⁰

In 1993, Mr. Zion Uzayri visited the gravesite in Ta'izz and noted that there was no marker over its location. Mr. Uzayri remarked to local Muslim residents that it would be beneficial for them if they would keep a grave marker remain there since the place is also holy for Muslims, and it could also be a tourist attraction.³¹

3. Initiatives for the Restoration of the Grave

(1) In the early 1990s, Rabbi *Zemaḥ Yiṣḥaq Halevi* (Qaḍi), a native of Ṣan'ā', attempted to renew the marker over the grave site. Rabbi Zemaḥ held American citizenship. For his endeavour he travelled to Ta'izz where he met with a local woman, Ni'ma, and at his request she helped him to locate the grave.

28 YOSEF SHA'AR, "ע"פ מכתבים, ביקורי משלחות ודברי" שארית הפליטה של היהודים בגולת תימן [מבקים], in: Rabbi SHALOM GAMLIEL, MISHAEL MASURI CASPI, and SHIM'ON AVIZEMER (eds.), ארחות תימן (Jerusalem 1984), pp. 252-262, esp. p. 253.

29 SHA'AR, "שארית הפליטה של היהודים בגולת תימן" (note 28 above), pp. 257-58.

30 For a photograph of the telegram, see ḤAYIM TAWIL, – מבצע אסתר – על כנפי נשרים: פתיחת השערים לאחרוני יהודי תימן (1993-1989) (Jerusalem 2006), pp. 316-17.

31 In an interview in New York on 15.08.2007.

He received reliable information from her about the precise site of Rabbi Shabazī's grave. It was in an area of other Jewish graves, which were also desolate and destroyed. In order to deal with the restoration of Rabbi Shabazī's grave, Rabbi Zemaḥ worked to obtain permits from the authorities; I have three government documents about this. Rabbi Zemaḥ obtained a letter, dated 7th August 1990, from the person in charge of the government branch in Ta'izz. The logo on the letter reads *Al-Ġumbūrīya al-'Arabīya al-Yamanīya, Ra'īs al-Ġumbūrīya, Ta'izz* (The Arab Republic of Yemen, Directorate of the Commonwealth, The Antiquities and Libraries Authority, Ta'izz Branch). The letter reads as follows:

إلى من يهمه الأمر

تود الهيئة العامة للآثار ودور الكتب العلم وإحاطة إلى أنها قد كلفت المستر سماح إسحاق القاضي أمريكي الجنسية بالإشراف على قبر سالم سعيد الشبزي وترميمه بالتعاون مع الهيئة العامة للآثار ودور الكتب لما لهذا القبر من أهميته تاريخية عند اليهود والمسلمين. وهذا للعلم [...]

To whom it may concern,

The Antiquities and Libraries Authority wishes to announce that it has appointed Mr. Zemaḥ Yiṣḥaq Qaḍi, an American citizen, to oversee the grave of Sālim Sa'īd³² al-Shabazī and to restore it, in cooperation with the General Antiquities and Libraries Authority, due to the historical importance of this grave for Jews and Muslims. This is to inform [...]

[Signature and stamp]

With this letter, he received authorization from the Antiquities Authority to deal with the renovation of the Rabbi Shabazī's grave, since the site was of historical value for both Jews and Muslims.

Rabbi Zemaḥ commissioned a tombstone from a local business in Yemen to use for marking the location of the historical site. The tombstone ordered measured 190 cm long, 90 cm wide and 65 cm high. About the text that would appear on the stone, he consulted with Rabbi Yosef Šubayrī, of blessed memory, and with Rabbi Shelomo 'Amram Qoraḥ. Below is the text, proposed by Rabbi Zemaḥ, for the tombstone:

Buried here
is the shining light of Yemenite Jewry
The Rabbi, the Gaon, the Saint, the מקובל (*mequbbal*)
the Man of Many Actions, our Teacher and Rabbi,
R. Shalom b. R. Yosef al-Shabazī,

32 Should have been *Yosef*.

in blessed memory of the קדיש (*ṣaddiq*) and saint,
 who wrote commentaries on the Torah
 and on the Qabbala, with great expertise
 He composed thousands of poems and a great many wondrous *piyyuṭim*
 According to the Holy Torah
 He wrought many wonders during his lifetime and afterward
 And by his merit many men, women, and children were healed
 and many women, no matter what faith, gave birth.
 May his merit protect us
 May his soul be bound in the bundle of life.

About a year after the first letter, a second one, dated 19 August 1991, was received from the Antiquities Authority, from the office in Ta'izz. The director of the Antiquities Authority, 'Abdallah Muhammad al-Maqqai, sent the letter bearing his signature, stating that the archaeologist Muhammad al-Ma'ūrī was involved in archaeological research and renovations in the area of "Qāhira," and requesting not to disturb him nor anyone working with him, so as to make his task easier. A third letter from the Antiquities Authority, from the Ṣan'ā' office, was written over a month later, on 28 August 1991. Dr. Yusef Muhammad 'Abdallah, who was deputy chairman of the General Authority for Antiquities, Museums, and Manuscripts, sent the letter he signed to the governor of the Ta'izz district. It stated that, due to complaints received by the General Authority, namely, that a number of citizens were trying illegally to take control over sites of antiquities in the district, especially in the city of Ta'izz, the Ṣan'ā' office which, according to the law of protection of antiquities, is the only institution responsible for that, seeking to protect all antiquities' sites, including historical graves in the region of western Ta'izz.

Of note is that Rabbi Zemaḥ was involved in this project during the Gulf War between Iraq and the United States. He began his endeavour in August 1990, shortly before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which resulted in the Gulf War. During the war, which broke out in January 1991, Rabbi Zemaḥ was forced to postpone his plan to return to the US. When he did go back, about a year later, he tried to revive the program. However, in August 1991, there were elements that tried to block his achieving his goal, so Rabbi Zemaḥ worked to obtain the second letter. The harassment did not stop, and a complaint that was submitted to the ministry in Ṣan'ā' put an end to Rabbi Zemaḥ's activity concerning Rabbi Shabazī's grave.³³

33 I would like to thank Rabbi Eliyahu Yiṣḥaq Halevi (Qaḍi), who put at my disposal lists and documents relevant to this issue, owned by his father, Rabbi Zemaḥ.

(2) Mr. *Shelomo Jerafi* is the chairman of ICROJOY (Yemenite Heritage Foundation Inc.). The foundation works to bring to Israel Jews who are still in northern Yemen. It also dealt with Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave. Shelomo Jerafi's emissaries to Yemen were the U.S. residents Moshe Damti and Shalom Cohen, descendants of Yemenite immigrants to Israel. They were active in Yemen in the period 1993–2004. The review below is based on reports written to Mr. Jerafi.³⁴

On 28 November 1996, Shalom Cohen wrote that on the site of the cemetery a school was built that comprises four structures and that the school compound is surrounded by a stone fence. Moreover, part of the cemetery's area is used as a soccer field. He met with the elderly Ni'ma, who knows the exact spot where Rabbi Shabazī's grave is located,³⁵ and he noted that she lied in her opening remarks and said that a half year earlier Jews had come and taken the remains of Rabbi Shabazī. The old woman showed Shalom Cohen the precise spot of the grave by throwing a stone on it. The plot is located outside the fence on the mountain's South Eastern slope. He also said that there is inherent danger in gathering and taking photos near the grave.

Most of the activity vis-à-vis the authorities in Yemen seeking a permit for constructing the grave of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī took place in 1999. On 29 January 1999, Shalom Cohen met, in Ta'izz, with Mohammad Mojahid, director of the Ministry of Tourism in Ta'izz, who promised him that he would promote this issue. It was further agreed that Shelomo Jerafi would be in contact with Mohammad to advance the matter.

On 1 July 1999, Shlomo Jerafi sent a letter about Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave to Prof. Yousuf M. Abdullah, who had been appointed to the most senior position in the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. On 29 June 1999, Shalom Cohen met in Ṣan'ā' with Prof. Abdullah, who was quite familiar with the topic of Rabbi Shabazī's grave site from the time of the attempt made by Rabbi Zemaḥ Yiṣḥaq Halevi (Qaḍi). He suggested locating the site of the grave with the assistance of Ni'ma, the old woman, who would be responsible for the grave site, and he promised that he would subsequently take care to see that there would be no religious opposition in Ta'izz about this matter.

34 I would like to thank Shelomo Jerafi, who made the emissaries' reports available to me as well as additional material about his activity on behalf of the grave and for the bringing of Rabbi Shabazī's remains for re-interment in Israel.

35 On Ni'ma, see above the beginning of the previous sub-section in the statements by Rabbi Zemaḥ Yiṣḥaq Halevi (Qaḍi).

On 31 October 1999, Shelomo Jerafi sent a letter in English to Mohamed Hussein Guyman, chairman of the Public Authority for the Protection of the Historic Cities, regarding establishing a Jewish museum in Ṣan‘ā’ and restoring Rabbi Shabazī’s grave. Included in the letter was information about his meeting in New York with the prime minister of Yemen, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Iryānī. Mr. Jerafi told him that opening a Jewish museum in Ṣan‘ā’ and restoring the grave site of Rabbi Shabazī in Ta‘izz were likely to promote tourism to Yemen and that the association he chaired was prepared to fund all the financial expenses entailed in carrying out these projects.

On 4 November 1999, Moshe Damti met, in one of the government offices in Ṣan‘ā’, with senior members of the government, and he presented them a letter he had prepared containing his request that they prepare a letter for him on behalf of the authorities that would authorize him to deal with the construction of Rabbi Shabazī’s grave site. At the end of the meeting, he was told that the request would be passed on for consideration by those in charge of the issue. At another meeting he held, he was told that the matter would be handed over to the minister of tourism, ‘Abdul Malik Maṣṣūr, who was dealing with it. Mr. Damti met with the minister’s secretary, who told him that the request had been sent to him and he would deal with the issue of the grave. Mr. Damti went to the site of the grave in Ta‘izz, and according to the testimony heard from people living in the environs of the grave, which was located on the slope of a mountain, it had been covered with soil during the construction of a school nearby. Mr. Damti returned to Ṣan‘ā’ and met with Minister Maṣṣūr and with Aḥmed Al-Daylam; from their discussion he understood that the minister of tourism was interested in assisting in the matter since this would help him establish connections with Jews in the United States. The minister further said that for final approval of the request, he had to present it to the president of the country, ‘Abdallah Ṣaliḥ. Mr. Damti returned home to the US with the feeling that the request would be approved and that they would soon send him a letter in response approving construction of the grave.³⁶

On October 7th, 2000, Shelomo Jerafi received an English-language fax from Ahmad Al-Daylam from Ṣan‘ā’, informing him about the project to restore R. Sh. Shabazī’s grave in Ta‘izz, which the company, that he headed (Al-Daylam Company for Investment and General Trading Ltd.),

36 From a report by the Emissary Moshe Damti to Shelomo Jerafi about activities on behalf of the Rabbi Shabazī’s grave. I spoke with Mr. Damti about this at his home during my stay in New York in July 2012.

is prepared to carry out, and requesting that he had to present an authorization from the bank for a monetary payment for the reconstruction. Ten days later, on 17th October 2000, Shelomo Jarafī responded to him that before transferring the money, he would like to see an official permit from the government for this endeavour as well as have him prepare the plan for the area he will be renovating and obtain the permit from the Ta‘izz municipality. Mr. Jarafī prepared the text of an inscription that was to appear at the site marking the grave, as follows,

Here is the burial site of
Rabbi Shalom Shabazī
(a saint and holy person of blessed memory)
ben Rabbi Yosef ben Avigad ben Ḥalfon of the Mashta family
Born in 1619 in the village of Najd al-Walid near Ta‘izz

The greatest poet of Yemen

His poetry has become an inseparable part
of the world of Yemenite Jews everywhere,
From its beginning through this day his grave has been a pilgrimage site
for Jews and others, who visited his grave to ask for cures for their illnesses
ICROJOY: The Association for the Tradition of the Jews of Yemen

Ultimately, all the efforts mentioned came to naught; apparently because of the hostility of part the officials in charge as well as that of the population living in the vicinity of the grave to emphasizing Jewish elements in the area of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī’s grave.

(3) In 2007 an attempt was made by *Rabbi Yisrael Meir Gabbai*, chairman of the אהלי צדיקים (*Ohalei Ṣaddiqim*) association, which sees to the maintenance of graves of rabbis, to set up a tombstone at the grave of R. Sh. Shabazī. He did place a gravestone near R. Shabazī’s grave and the sign he placed on the monument states: “The resting place of the man of God, the illuminator of Yemenite Jewry, Abba Shalom Shabazī, may his merit protect us.”³⁷ From the information, I received from the journalist Yitzhak Horwitz, who visited me at home, the tombstone was destroyed shortly after it was raised.

37 For an article on this, see AHARON MICHAELI, “The Secret Campaign in Yemen: the Chairman of the ‘Ohalei Ṣaddiqim’ association set up a gravestone over the grave of the holy gaon Rabbi Shalom Shabazī, may his merit protect us, the leading rabbi of Yemen,” in: יום ליום (weekly), 6 Dec. 2007, p. 6 [in Hebrew].

4. Efforts to Bring Rabbi Shalom Shabazi's Remains to Israel for Re-interment

Jewish tradition greatly abhors opening a grave in order to transfer the remains of the deceased from place to place. This is discussed in the Jerusalem Talmud:

One should not remove the deceased and the bones from one distinguished grave to another and from one contemptible grave to another and not from a contemptible one to a distinguished one, and obviously not from a distinguished grave to a contemptible one. And even in his own location, even from distinguished to contemptible, for it is pleasant for a person to be rest peaceably among his forebears.³⁸

One of the reasons for the interdiction against opening the grave is to preserve the dignity of the deceased, since opening it will result in debasing of the dead when people will see the condition of his body.³⁹ Another reason is that upon opening the grave the soul suffers.⁴⁰ Still, there are some, who permit opening a grave for moving the deceased's remains for burial in the Land of Israel. As R. Qaro wrote in the Shulḥan 'Arukh, after quoting the *halakha* as stated in the Jerusalem Talmud:

The deceased and his bones are not to be removed, not from a distinguished grave to a distinguished grave and not from a contemptible grave to a contemptible grave and not from a contemptible grave to a distinguished grave, let alone from a distinguished one to a contemptible one. And in his own place, even from a distinguished one to a contemptible one, it is permitted since it is pleasant for a person to rest among his forebears. And also in order to reinter him in the Land of Israel, it is permissible.⁴¹

38 yMQ 2, 4.

39 See bBB 154a, 155a; MOSHE B. MAIMON, הלכות מכירה 29, 16. See also the commentary by Rabbi DAVID IBN ZIMRA (Radbaz) to הלכות אבלות in Maimonides' משנה תורה 14, 16.

40 See, for example, the commentary of R. YOSEF QARO, בית יוסף, to the ארבעה טורים by YA'AQOV BEN ASHER (Harosh), § 363: "Since the disturbance is difficult for the dead owing to their fear of Judgement Day. An allusion to this is, 'I should have slept; then had I been at rest' (Job 3:13), and in the Book of Samuel, 'Why have you disquieted me, to bring me up?' (1. Sam. 28:15)."

41 Shulḥan Arukh, יורה דעה, הלכות אבלות § 363, 1. Rabbi SHABTAI KATZ wrote about the permission for interment in the Land of Israel in his commentary שפתי כוהן regarding the *halakha* mentioned, "For it is his atonement, since the soil of the Land of Israel atones, as it is written (Deut. 32:43), 'and He does make expiation for the land of His people'."

About bringing the bones of the deceased to the Land of Israel, we read in Joseph's request that his bones should be brought up to the Land of Israel for burial: "And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him; for he had strictly sworn the children of Israel, saying: 'God will surely remember you; and you shall carry up my bones away hence with you' (Ex. 13:19)."

When immigrating to the Land of Israel with his family in 1950, Rabbi 'Amram Qoraḥ, who was the last chief rabbi of the Yemenite Jews in their Exile, asked the Imam Aḥmad to let him take with him the remains of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī. Despite the good, ongoing relations between Rabbi Qoraḥ and Imam Aḥmad and his father, the Imam Yiḥye, Aḥmad refused the request, claiming that the Muslims would not allow vacating this grave because it was holy for them too.⁴²

In the years following the establishment of the State of Israel, attempts have been by a number of bodies to bring R. Sh. Shabazī's remains to Israel for re-interment. Rabbi Yosef Qafilḥ provided information about this in his letter to Prof. Ratzaby, dated Thursday, 12 June 1952:

I wish to inform you that last week there was a meeting of the Community Committee about the Shabazī matter. I was invited but did not attend. Attending were Yisrael⁴³ as well as MK Rachel Tsabari and they decided to appeal to the community's rabbis asking them to sign on a request that they wish and demand to bring the remains, and many have already signed. Yet, many refrained from doing so, some out of fear that the distinguished poet will punish them if they disturb his peace, while others for different reasons.... As for me, when they turned to me, I promised them to sign after I would write my opinion about the matter from a theoretical point of view. For as I see it, even though the *Halakha* permits removing the deceased to bring him to Eretz Israel, one must differentiate between burial in a coffin and burial in the ground. If we do allow it, we must take soil at a depth of a few תפאחם (*tefahim*) around it. Moreover, the Kabbala and the Zohar oppose taking the bones to Eretz Israel. However, since Shabazī was a great מקובל (*mequbbal*), one should not do with him something to which he would not agree.⁴⁴

As stated above, the issue of Rabbi Sh. Shabazī's grave was raised in the Knesset on 21 December 1977. MK Rabbi Menaḥem Hacohen made an

42 In a letter to me written by his grandson, Rabbi Shelomo Qoraḥ, on 21 May 2014.

43 The reference is to Yisrael Yeshayahu, a native of Ṣan'ā' who immigrated to Israel and served as a minister in the Israeli government as well as Speaker of the Knesset.

44 New York, The Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary, Yehuda Ratzabi Archive, ARC 2001-01, Correspondence, Box 3.

agenda proposal about “the need for political action to bring the remains of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī for interment in Israel.”⁴⁵

On 29 June 1999 Shalom Cohen wrote in a report about his visit to the area in which Rabbi Shabazī’s grave is located, that he met with the old women Ni‘ma, who knows the location of the grave, and he was told that she still heals children next to the grave. To the question if one can still find the bones of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī at the site, the old women’s son told him about what happened with a tractor that came to dig next to the grave – a snake emerged from the grave’s location and terrified those working at the task. When they wanted to shoot the snake, it disappeared and they left the site without finishing their work. He feels that if people want to know with certainty the location of the bones, people must be brought there to dig, and if a snake should come out, then it is a sign that there are bones, and if not, there is nothing there.

On 16 September 1999, an article appeared in the Yemenite Arabic newspaper *الأسبوع* (*al-‘Usbu’*) entitled: *٢٠ مليون دولار لنقل رفات (الشبزي)* (“Twenty Million Dollars to Move Bones [al-Shabazī]”), stating that diplomats in Ṣan‘ā’ had given a notice to the paper that a Jewish delegation consisting of Meshullam Cohen and Moshe Damti, mentioned above, members of the Zionist lobby in America, had visited Yemen and had offered the government of Yemen twenty million dollars in exchange for the authorization to bring the bones of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī to the United States and from there to Jerusalem. The article further stated that in the past, there had been a request from government affiliates in Israel to the government of Yemen about bringing R. Shabazī’s bones for burial in Israel, but the Yemenite authorities had not agreed to the proposal.⁴⁶ About three weeks later there appeared in the same paper, on 7 October 1999, under the title of *لا رغبة في نقل رفات الشبزي* (“There Is No Desire to Transfer Shabazī’s Remains”), a denial of the item that mentioned the giving of \$ 20 million to transfer the remains. There was mention of the information about the meetings of Moshe Damti and Shalom Cohen with representatives of the Yemenite government about the request to construct the gravesite of Rabbi Sh. Shabazī, discussions that led nowhere.⁴⁷

45 *דברי הכנסת* (note 25 above), p. 841.

46 *Al-Usbū‘, Siyāsīya Mustaqilla* (سياسية • مستقلة) [The Week, politically independent], Thursday, 16 Sept. 1999, 7 Jamadi al-Thani 1420, book 47, p. 1.

47 *Al-Usbū‘, Siyāsīya Mustaqilla* (سياسية • مستقلة), Thursday, 7 October 1999, Jamadi al-Akhira 1420, number 50, p. 1.

In the Israeli press, articles occasionally appeared on the need to bring Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's remains to Israel for re-interment. They even spoke of the need to find Rabbi Shabazī's descendants for genetic DNA testing. The activist in the most recent generation was Shelomo Jerafi as noted.⁴⁸

One must remember that for DNA testing two samples are required, that is, from the offspring of Rabbi Shabazī as well as from his remains.⁴⁹ As strange as it may seem, there is no one today who can provide a family tree going back to Rabbi Sh. Shabazī (one family, the Gurayn family from Ḥujariyya in southern Yemen, has an unproven tradition that they are descendants of Rabbi Shalom Shabazī⁵⁰). That being the case, it is impossible to perform genetic testing and the idea must be abandoned.

Summary

We have actual testimony about Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's grave from the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1930s it was destroyed, and a tombstone over it was subsequently rebuilt and the site was ringed by a roofless stone structure. In the 1980s the grave was destroyed, and in the past generation, unsuccessful attempts were made to restore it.

After the mass immigration of the Jews from Yemen in the "On the Wings of Eagles" campaign in 1949–1950, the idea of bringing Rabbi Shalom Shabazī's remains to Israel for re-interment has been discussed a number of times. Now, that the grave is destroyed and the precise burial site is not clearly identified, this aim is unattainable.

48 For example, see the article in מעריב entitled "Wanted: Descendants of Shalom Shabazī," from 28 Nov. 2006, p. 13.

49 On the halakhic issue of removing the deceased from the grave for the purpose of taking a sample, see Rabbi ZVI YEHUDA BEN YA'AQOV, "קביעת יורש על-סמך," in: תחומים 22 (2002), pp. 419–24.

50 See RAḌA, מבוא לארץ אלהוגריה (note 1 above), p. 33 n. 10.