RAHEL: Growing up, I really didn't know what language was being spoken. I didn't know if it was Judeo-Arabic, I didn't know if it was Hindi, I didn't even know if it was English. So, very interesting blend of cultures and language.

SARAH: This is Heritage Words, a podcast about the words we've inherited from our ancestors and the meaning they bring to our lives. Heritage Words is produced by the HUC Jewish Language Project, which raises awareness about Jewish ancestral diversity through the lens of language. I'm the host, Sarah Bunin Benor. Before our conversation, I want to share a listener message. This one came from a guest, writer Samantha Ellis, who shares Rahel's Iraqi ancestry. She wrote, "Just wanted to say my parents listened to the podcast & they listen to everything I do & they said it was the best one I'd done & you were amazing & was I sure you weren't Iraqi!" Our guest today is Rahel Musleah. Rahel is an award-winning journalist, author, singer, storyteller, and educator. Her publications include Apples and Pomegranates: A Family Seder for Rosh Hashanah, Why on This Night? A Passover Haggadah for Family Celebration, and a CD of Shabbat and holiday melodies, Hodu: Jewish Rhythms From Baghdad to India. And these are all available on her website, explorejewishindia.com. She leads in-person Jewish heritage tours to India twice a year. She infuses each tour with her personal spiritual and musical insights and her knowledge of India's Jewish history. Her family's story is really important for raising awareness about a rich culture that most people are not aware of. And I first met Rahel when I was giving a talk at a synagogue in Long Island, and she was leading services with multiple melodies and nuschaot, and I was very impressed, and I said, I have to have you on the podcast. So, Rahel, welcome to Heritage Words.

RAHEL: Thank you, Sarah. It's so lovely to be here, and I'm glad we met in that very, as you say in Yiddish, bashert way.

SARAH: Absolutely. Well, let's start by talking about your names. There's often a lot of history embedded in names, and I want to hear about yours.

RAHEL: So, it's interesting that the way that you said my name is the Hebrew way, right? Rachel Matsliach, right? So, Matsliach means successful in Hebrew, and Rachel is Rachel. But I was born in India, in Calcutta, and I left there when I was six years old, but the way that my name was pronounced was Rahel Musleah. In fact, Rahel Musleah. Because of the Arabic influence of the first Jews who settled in Calcutta were from Syria and from Baghdad, and so, you know, the Arabic influence on the Hebrew, the chet is a soft sound, the tsadi is a soft sound. So, it was Rahel Musleah. And then, I really went by that name for a long time until I went to Israel, and I was like, what is Rahel Musleah? And I was just thrilled when I saw a bus go by that said, 'im Agfa ze matsliach.' You know, Agfa was a film company, they sold film, and I was like, wow, Matsliach, because I thought there was only one kind of Matsliach, and then I looked in the phone book, and there were a million Iraqi Matsliach's. So, when I came back, I introduced myself as Rachel Matsliach, but now it depends who I'm talking to. If I'm talking to, you know, somebody from the cable company, I'm still going to say Rahel Musleah. It just depends. I was named after my grandmother, Rachel, Rahel, Rachel. Actually, she was known by Rachel. So, you know, my father was a rabbi, more leaning towards the Hebrew side of

things. So, still people make mistakes on my name, and they think I forgot to put in the C, and they call me Rachel. The Matsliach part, I guess, goes back to Baghdad. My paternal—I don't know how many greats, great-great-great-great grandfather, Eliyahu, was the grandson of the Nasi, the head of the community of Baghdad. He came to Calcutta and settled there in 1820. My maternal grandfather, also from a rabbinic family, arrived in Calcutta around, I don't know, sometime between 1902 and 1910. I'm not really sure of the date. And they were the first members of my family to settle in India. But we know that—my father did a lot of work in genealogy of the family, and so he found that in 1781, one of my father's ancestors Chacham Rav Salah Matsliach and one of my mother's ancestors, Chacham Rav Sason Shinduch, both leaders of the Baghdadi community, signed their names on the same ketubah, on the same marriage contract. So, somehow, the families knew each other in Baghdad, and then my parents got married in India in 1955.

SARAH: Oh my gosh, wow. So, Calcutta is one of the cities in India that has a Baghdadi community in it. And your family was all from Calcutta?

RAHEL: So, the first settlers in Calcutta were actually from Aleppo, from Syria, and all the members, three sides of my family are Baghdadi, but my grandmother, who I'm named for, one side of her family is from Aleppo. But mostly, the community, once the Baghdadi started settling in Calcutta, mostly followed the Baghdadi heritage and melodies and so on. But, you know, in India, anybody who is from the Middle East, in the Jewish community, is called Baghdadi.

SARAH: Oh, that's interesting.

RAHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: By other Jews or also non-Jews?

RAHEL: By other Jews, yeah.

SARAH: Okay. So, what language did your parents speak?

RAHEL: My parents' first language was English, because the British were still in India when they were born, so they grew up speaking British English, British Indian English, let me make that clarification. My first language was also English. I went to a sort of day school called the Jewish Girl School in Calcutta, so I learned Hebrew, and we had a lot of domestic help, and so I grew up speaking Hindustani as well, which is a mixture of Hindi and Urdu. That's what I spoke when I came to the United States, those three languages.

SARAH: How old were you when you came to the U.S.?

RAHEL: I was six years old.

SARAH: Okay.

RAHEL: And we came and we settled in Philadelphia.

SARAH: So, up until age six, you were in Calcutta, and did you also have any exposure to other Indian languages there?

RAHEL: The other local language in Calcutta was Bengali, because Calcutta is in the state of West Bengal, but we didn't speak it. My grandfather did learn how to speak it because he worked in an office and he wanted to know what the other employees were saying. So, he taught himself Bengali, but I never spoke Bengali and my parents didn't either.

SARAH: Did your school have any instruction in Hindustani?

RAHEL: They had instruction in Hindi, but I was not old enough to be in those classes. My mother did have a Hindi primer, which I still have, but my parents, when we came to the United States, we spoke Hindustani fluently, but we didn't really keep up with speaking it in Philadelphia. Like, my parents thought, what use are we going to have in Philadelphia to speak Hindustani? So, I lost my ability to really speak it fluently, although all the words are all, you know, floating around and in my head. And so, when I got older and I wanted to sort of relearn it, I asked them, like, what are the grammatical rules of this language? And they were just like, I don't know, it's just like a spoken language. It doesn't have any rules. And then I tried to take a Hindi class as an adult and I found it to be very different than what I was used to hearing, even though there were familiar words, because I was used to the way that my parents spoke, it was almost more difficult to adjust to more like a formal language.

SARAH: Do you think the way your parents spoke was distinctively Jewish in any way?

RAHEL: No, it was probably more anglicized.

SARAH: Yeah, that makes sense.

RAHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: And do you remember anyone speaking Hindi or Hindustani with Hebrew words mixed in?

RAHEL: Everybody spoke with a mixture of languages. So, my paternal grandparents died before I was born. My maternal grandparents moved to London when I was two years old. And we moved when I was six and we were just like a little island of oasis of Indian Jewish culture in Philadelphia. So, I didn't really have a lot of other people speaking to me, but in our home, everything was a mixture of English and Hindustani. All the food words are Hindustani or Hindi. And, you know, since I grew up in that environment, many of the words were familiar to me. But my grandmother and probably that generation that spoke Arabic more fluently, they would mix all the words in their speaking. And growing up, I really didn't know what language was being

spoken. I didn't know if it was Judeo-Arabic, I didn't know if it was Hindi, I didn't even know if it was English. So, very interesting blend of cultures and language.

SARAH: Yeah, it was your familect.

RAHEL: Yeah. Yeah.

SARAH: Before I ask you about those heritage words that were mixed into the English in your Philadelphia home, I want to ask about the name of the language, Hindustani. So, my understanding is that that was what the language was called before the partition of India and Pakistan. And after that partition, the Indian version became known as Hindi and the Pakistani version became known as Urdu. Is that accurate?

RAHEL: Yeah. I think it's a mixture of Hindi and Urdu. And it's interesting because I asked my tour partner, who lives in Mumbai, you know, I said, I grew up speaking Hindustani. And he was like, you know, what is that? He didn't even know what it was really because it all just became Hindi. But I think that's correct.

SARAH: Okay. And my understanding is also that Hindi is written in the Devanagari script and that Urdu is written in the Arabic script. Do you know how to read either one of those?

RAHEL: Nope.

SARAH: Okay.

RAHEL: No, sorry to say, although I make an attempt, but it's—I have to say, honestly, that the Baghdadi Jewish part of it is more important to me than the Indian Indian part of it.

SARAH: Yeah.

RAHEL: Although I grew up saying that I was Indian and I didn't even know anything about the Baghdadi part, I just said I was Indian, later when I moved to Great Neck, New York, and I met Iraqi Jews, I realized that I was Baghdadi-Indian. And so I started hyphenating the origin of my heritage. And then when I started leading my tour groups to India, I realized even more, this is one of the communities, because the distances in India are so great between one place and the next. I didn't really know anything about Bombay or Mumbai or Cochin or anything. So, I was kind of isolated in my identity at that time.

SARAH: Yeah. Well, what made you realize that you are Baghdadi in Great Neck?

RAHEL: Because there are a lot of Iraqis in Great Neck and there are a couple of synagogues, the Babylonian Jewish Center, the Bene Naharayim in Queens, which has, like, some older Baghdadi Jews, or more directly from Iraq, as opposed to the Babylonian Jewish Center, which has a lot of Jews who came from Iraq, but their heritage was from Iran. I believe that's correct.

And I went to Bene Naharayim quite a few times, and I spoke to the people who were members there, and I was just like, wow, now I—now I feel at home. Like, now I know where I came from, you know, so it was very interesting.

SARAH: Well, what were some of the things that made you feel at home? Was it the way they spoke or?

RAHEL: How they spoke, the—the inflections, the synagogue prayers, the food that they served at the kiddush, all that. Yeah. The Sifrei Torah, like, everything about the synagogue was familiar.

SARAH: So what kind of synagogue did you go to in Philadelphia?

RAHEL: So, my father—as I said, my father is a rabbi. He came to the United States in 1947, studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary, went back to Calcutta to serve the community for 12 years. And when the British left and Israel became a state, most of the Jewish communities in India either went to Israel, and a lot of Baghdadi Jews went to England, Australia, Canada, the United States. And so the community was diminishing, and my father really wanted to get a job elsewhere and thought in advance of, you know, what kind of life were his three daughters going to have, or their, my parents going to have. So he looked for a pulpit in the United States and the closest to Sephardic practice that he could find, was Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, which is a colonial Spanish and Portuguese synagogue. So we were transplanted there. My father, I have a distinct memory of him listening to a reel-to-reel tape recorder with the elderly, they called them ministers of Mikveh Israel, so that he could learn everything before the high holidays. And so I grew up in a Spanish and Portuguese tradition. And, again, when I—my father, having three daughters, taught us a lot at home, so it was a lot of homeschooling to preserve the Baghdadi Indian tradition. Everything we did, you know, Pesach seder, Rosh Hashanah, Shabbat, Pizmonim, everything was as we did it in India, almost. But the synagogue liturgy that I grew up with, except for the fact that my father would often do the, what in Ashkenazic terminology is Pesukei Dezimra, that we call Zmirot, he would often do that at home on Shabbat. And the sound of that is still very beautiful in my—in my head. I learned a lot from him. I went on a specific mission to learn as much as I could.

SARAH: And how did you go about that learning?

RAHEL: The Pizmonim were just, like, part of who we were. We sang them every Shabbat, lots and lots of singing. And so that wasn't really something that I needed to relearn. But the Shabbat nusach—and also he taught us the trope, even though we were in a—we were in an Orthodox synagogue and we could not participate. We knew the Spanish and Portuguese trope, and we knew the Baghdadi Indian trope, or the Torah and the Haftara. But the services, I basically sat down with him at the dining room table, and I would just say like, now I want to learn. I want to learn the Friday night, you know, Maariv service. Not just the weekday Maariv service, I want to learn the Shabbat morning service. So we would sit together and he would teach me. And I repeated after him, and I recorded what he sang. And sometimes I wasn't sure

what note he was singing, because of the microtones, and I would say, is this the note? Is that the note? Are you singing flat? Are you sharp? So I consider that that dining room table was like a holy place. I didn't think of it at the time like that. But after he passed away, I have a lot of recordings of him on my phone. He made a lot of recordings himself to preserve the melodies. And also, I made a point one—one year to call him every morning for him to sing a chapter of Tehillim until we were done with all 150.

SARAH: Wow. And do you have recordings of those?

RAHEL: They were on cassette tapes, and some of them didn't survive that well. But some of them did. And honestly, when he passed away, he published a book with different customs of death and mourning, which I didn't open that book, really. But we followed all the customs. And one of the customs is to sing some of the Tehillim, especially Psalm, I think it's 91, that has a repetition of each letter three times. So I was able to sing some of that in the trope that he taught me at his funeral, and then in the shiva minyanim.

SARAH: Wow.

RAHEL: So it became very meaningful. And it was also a bond that we shared to learn this music together.

SARAH: Wow. Wow, that's beautiful. And when did he die?

RAHEL: He died in 2020, the beginning of COVID.

SARAH: From COVID?

RAHEL: From COVID.

SARAH: I'm so sorry.

RAHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: Well, I want to get back to your comments about specific words that you used that are Ashkenazi, like trope, and shiva. And I'm wondering how you feel about using those words. Obviously, you grew up in Philadelphia, so you were probably exposed to words like that. But how does that play into your desire to keep your ancestral culture alive?

RAHEL: I don't find that they have any interference. I live in this culture. And I, you know, still have a lot of Indian and a lot of Baghdadi in me. But I can't deny that I'm very Americanized now as well. When I went to JTS for their undergraduate program, I didn't really know a word of Yiddish. In fact, when we first came to Philadelphia, some of the members of Mikveh Israel, you know, they were Ashkenazic. So they would, like, pinch my cheeks and say shayna punim. And

I, like, no idea what they were saying. I just, like, looked at them blankly. Now I know what it means, pretty face, but I had no idea what they meant. So they're just like Americanized words.

SARAH: Yeah.

RAHEL: You know, that's what people say.

SARAH: Absolutely.

RAHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: So let's get to the Arabic. So what are some of the words that were used in your household when people were speaking English, but that were from Judeo-Baghdadi Arabic?

RAHEL: Okay. So I thought about this a little bit and I kind of broke it down: Arabic, Hindi, even English, even Hebrew. So one thing that always pops into my mind and I—I had to look up whether this word is Hindi, Hindustani, like, Arabic, what is it? So kabrowed. So my mother used to say this a lot. She would say I'm kabrowed and it seems to be related to come from Arabic. Like, I'm fed up, I'm irritated, I'm exasperated. And it was turned into a sort of, like, English-style, past tense, hybrid verb-adjective. So sometimes I use it like, I'm bored, I'm kabrowed, you know? So I still say that a lot. I remember this word called wehawe, which is a term of shock or distress. And we were always told that this was a curse word. I think it's because children weren't supposed to hear bad news. It's like, oh my God, wehawe. And I think it's, you know, a superstitious kind of thing that children shouldn't say this. One of my favorite words that of course I still use all the time is awafi, which is what you say when somebody burps. And I love it because it makes this act of burping into a polite thing. I hope you enjoyed your food. And it makes more sense to me than bete'avon, you know, like enjoy what you're going to eat. Well, you enjoyed what you ate, awafi.

SARAH: I want to pause there because you're, I think, the third guest on our podcast who is of Baghdadi ancestry. And I think everyone has mentioned awafi. But no one has mentioned the other two words. So you think one of them is from Arabic and the second one, it may be from Hindi. You're not sure?

RAHEL: I don't know what it is. Kabrowed, that's what it is. I remember alawiyak and alawiyakum, God be with you, goodbye, when somebody leaves, and then there were all the food words, all the food dishes, which, how can you say them any other way? Actually that's not so true because the pastries that are called sambusak, we used to just say samusa, samusa, we didn't say the m-b-k part. And then it's confusing because then you have the Indian samosa, but we just called them all samusas. So, hidkata, babas, kubbes, kakas, kulichas, kishmish pata.

SARAH: Okay, wait, wait, wait, wait, you have to tell us what those things are, at least a brief description.

RAHEL: Okay, so kubbes are like a dumpling that's coated with semolina kind of flour, and has, like, ground chicken inside. I'm a vegetarian, so I didn't really eat too much kubbe, but, you know, I listened to the podcast you had with Samantha Ellis, and she mentioned the thing is like, you have a kubbe in your mouth, you're talking as if you have a kubbe in your mouth, and we used to say that too. It was often served in a beet khata, which is a sweet and sour dish, Bhagdadi, and the other things are like snacky things like a kaka, sounds terrible, but it's a round kind of pastry, studded with fennel seeds or kalonji, which are black nigella seeds. Kishmish padam, that's Hindustani, kishmish padam, raisins and almonds, which are used as a topping for palau rice, a lot of food words like that.

SARAH: Wow- those are great examples.

RAHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: Did you have any words that your parents or grandparents would use as a term of endearment?

RAHEL: Yes, so these words that are very meaningful to me, they could go both ways. So one is kaleja. Okay, so kaleja means liver. It's Hindustani for liver, and so there were two phrases. One is a term of endearment, and one is kind of the opposite. So kaleja ka tukra is like the dear one—on my liver, my beloved one, my precious one, kaleja ka tukra. And the other one is when you say, it's on my kaleja. It's like something that's weighing on me, something that is disturbing or worrying me. But kaleja ka tukra is a good one.

SARAH: Okay. And then what about relatives? Any terms for grandma, grandpa, aunt, uncle, things like that?

RAHEL: So I called my grandmother and my grandfather Nana and Nani. Nani is for the grandmother. Nana is the grandfather. That's Hindi. And that would be for the maternal grandparents. And since I really didn't know my paternal grandparents, I didn't call them anything, which is a big loss to me. But I would have called them dada and dadi. So that's how it went. There were not really any other terms for relatives, except for the fact that because so many people had the same names, that sometimes they had to distinguish them. So they would say, like, the younger one was chota or choti, meaning the small one, and the older one was bara, meaning the, you know, bigger one. And I know that, like, my father, one of his uncles acted as a grandparent to him. And I think he used to call him, like, chota dada or something like that.

SARAH: And do you have children?

RAHEL: I do. I have two daughters, and I have three grandchildren, and they call me Nani.

SARAH: Aw, okay.

RAHEL: Yes, intentionally. I thought a long time about what I wanted to be called.

SARAH: Yeah, I mean, it makes sense, if that's the term that you had used for your maternal grandmother.

RAHEL: Not just that, I wanted them to really feel a connection to the culture that we came from. And, I didn't want to be Savta. I didn't feel comfortable with any of the other possibilities. And I was just like, Nani, that's me.

SARAH: Wow. And did you use words from Hindustani or Judeo-Arabic with your children when they were growing up?

RAHEL: Oh, yes, definitely. Some of them, they think, like, what are you saying? So, again, there are a lot of kitchen food words. So, for instance, a dish towel. I can't even say dish towel. Like, what is a dish towel? It's called a charan, right? So, that's Hindi or Hindustani. I'm not going to really distinguish between them, it's just—I'll just say Hindi. So, it's a charan. All the, like, spices, elaichi, which is cardamom, and turmeric, which is haldi, those kind of things, I don't say turmeric and cardamom usually, I just say what they are in Hindi. And I can't, like, pick out exactly things that I would say growing up. But I think sometimes they thought it was a little quaint. Like, they wanted me to say dish towel and not charan. But I feel like I already lost so much of the language that whatever I said that felt right to me, I was going to continue saying it. The other thing is that I taught them the Indian National Anthem, Jana Gana Mana, which they're very proud of still being able to sing, and they're going to teach their kids. And they're just like other kind of command words. I don't really say them so much. But I remember chalo, hurry up, or bolo, tell me, like my mother used to say those words. So, I think that with my grandchildren, I'm very intentionally trying to teach them Hebrew. And I'm going to also teach as much as possible. They know that I go to India twice a year. And they definitely look forward to what I'm bringing them back. You know, Diwali Barbie, or some sparkly dress, or a toy tuk tuk, whatever. So, my mother sang to me a Hindi lullaby. And I sang that to my children. And my daughter sings it to her children, and I sing it to them, too.

SARAH: Oh, wow, would you be able to sing that for us?

RAHEL: It's a very strange little song, but

SARAH: Okay.

RAHEL: it goes nini baba nini, mackhan roti cheene, mackhan roti hoa gia, mera baba soja. That part makes sense. [SINGING] So, the first part, I think they might be two different songs. I don't really know. But the first part is, sleep, baby, sleep, bread, butter, and sugar. The bread and butter is finished, and now my baby is sleeping. And the second part is like, rockabye baby on a treetop. So, it's, we're going to go into the jungle, and the bird is going to steal the baby. So, I don't know why we still sang that kind of song. But that's what it was.

SARAH: Was this a song that you think your non-Jewish neighbors would have also?

RAHEL: I think the ayahs sang it to us.

SARAH: What is that?

RAHEL: The nannies, the Indian—because my mother went to work. So, we had ayahs who took care of us at home.

SARAH: And, what language is ayah? Is that—

RAHEL: Hindi.

SARAH: Hindi.

RAHEL: Yeah.

SARAH: Okay. Ayah, okay. Wow. And were there other songs that you remember from India?

RAHEL: Since it was a very British-influenced culture, my mother liked to go to the movies. So, what other songs did she sing to us? Que sera sera. Would you like to swing on a star? Carmen Miranda. And so, that's why I think that the British influence was very strong as well when we even made it into services. So, in the Hakafot for Simchat Torah, they had a set progression of melodies that they would sing. And one was to the melody of Keep the Home Fires Burning. But that's, like, common, right? Our music is adapted and borrowed from the culture around us. So, it makes sense.

SARAH: Absolutely. And the language that your family used growing up was predominantly English, but similarly influenced by the predominant language around it, Hindustani, but also by your ancestral language, Judeo-Baghdadi Arabic, and probably also Hebrew. You're probably using lots of words from Hebrew for the religious concepts and for other things. Were there any Hebrew words that you remember growing up hearing that you then learned in a different pronunciation in America?

RAHEL: Almost everything. I think it's Judeo-Arabic that they used to call Kiddush, Kaddus. Although, again, I think that my father sort of stayed away from that pronunciation once he came to the United States, and he more emphasized the Hebrew as opposed to the Arabic. But I have to say that however we came to the United States speaking Hebrew with the Arabic pronunciation, it became to me a little bit embarrassing almost wanting to become Americanized. And so, this is, like, one of the, I don't know, sort of funny traumatic moments that I remember in growing up, that once, we had a guest and we were singing the Pizmonim and there was a song, the chorus is [SINGING], right? God blessed Shabbat and made it holy. And so we would say way-kadeshehu instead of vaykadeshehu and she very innocently said, why

are you saying ‘way’? Why aren't you saying ‘vaykadeshehu? And suddenly it made me feel like I was a stranger or I was doing something that wasn't kosher almost, like it was something to be embarrassed about. And so we always make funny of that, way-kadeshehu, why are you saying ‘way’? But I think that it had a very big influence on me trying to lose that kind of pronunciation and going more towards what I learned in school. I went to Solomon Schechter Day School and trying to become Americanized in the way that I spoke both English as well as Hebrew.

SARAH: How old were you at that incident?

RAHEL: I don't know, maybe eight.

SARAH: Mm. And then you mentioned at some point going to Israel. And so, when was the first time you were in Israel? How old were you?

RAHEL: I was 12. I entered an essay contest that I had to write in Hebrew, and I won. And so the, I don't know, Jewish Agency or something sent me on a trip to Israel.

SARAH: And when you were in Israel, did you encounter other people with similar background to yours?

RAHEL: So I went with my sister. I don't know how she got on the trip, but I'm glad. She's just a year and a half older than I am. And we stayed in a youth village and there were youth from all over the world. So there were Moroccan Jews and Tunisian Jews. And it was quite an amazing experience. So that was very eye opening for me. But we all spoke Hebrew. We didn't really speak any Arabic or anything. We just all spoke Hebrew.

SARAH: Yeah. And then you eventually decided that you wanted to speak Hebrew to your grandchildren. Tell us a little more about that decision.

RAHEL: Well, I'm not speaking it, you know, like, instead of speaking English, but I'm trying to intersperse as many words and phrases and concepts as—as I can. They're still very young. They're five, three and four months. But, you know, we count in Hebrew as we go up and down the stairs and we know the colors. And my daughter said to me, like, that she wants me to sort of augment their Jewish education. So I take it seriously. And, you know, I have started to tell her some stories, my older one, some stories about my background, like about how when we came on a ship to the United States and I got lost in Capri. And that was one of the stops that we made. And we got off the boat and my father thought I was with my mother, my mother thought I was with my father. I got separated, whatever. It's an iconic story in my family. So now it's passed down to my grandchildren as well.

SARAH: And are you also passing down holiday traditions that are specific to your Baghdadi Indian community?

RAHEL: Well, absolutely. So in this past Pesach, you know, it's not just the Baghdadis, but all the Sephardim, wherever we're from, that we have a custom of tying the afikomen in a scarf and a knapsack. And then the child says a phrase, mish'arotam tzerurot be'simlotam 'al shikhmam, that their knapsacks were tied on their backs, on their shoulders. So this past Pesach, I taught both my grandchildren—not the baby, he can't speak yet—to say that. And I recorded it and I just, like, think it's the most amazing thing. But one other thing that's tied to that, on my second group trip to India, I lead the services, the community has agreed to let me lead services in the Baghdadi Nusach in the Calcutta way. It's an Orthodox synagogue in its inception, but now since there are only 18 Jews left in Calcutta, we have an egalitarian group that comes. And so I lead the services. And it's an amazing experience. So, on my second trip, my daughter Shoshana came with me, and she agreed to read a Torah portion, an aliyah. And she especially wanted to read it, because the portion had in it mish'arotam tzerurot be'simlotam 'al shikhmam, and she grew up saying that. And now my grandchildren are, and I think, always, it couldn't have been a coincidence that that parasha had those words in it, because to me, it's not just the matzah that we're carrying with us, but it's our heritage that we're carrying with us. And so that phrase is very resonant for me. And then, you know, we have the thing that comes after that, the three questions, where are you from? Where are you going? In the seder. And so it's written in the Haggadah that we have - it is written in Hebrew, and it has a Judeo-Arabic translation. And when I was 15 years old, I sat with my father, and I learned as much of the sharach, we call the Arabic, as possible. So it's one of my great joys to prolong the seder and sing all that Arabic. But the kids learn to answer these questions that my father would say in Hebrew and in Arabic. And so they know that, and I'm sure that will be passed down. The Rosh Hashanah seder, all those things are customs that will be passed down. The Shabbat lamp, we call it tiriyah, like there are lots of ritual objects that we call by whatever name, you know, but the tiriyah hangs from the ceiling. They know all those things.

SARAH: Wow. And that image of carrying a package on your shoulder with your entire ancestry is so beautiful, especially since your ancestry is so rich with so many layers that mingle together in really interesting ways, such that people don't even necessarily know which layer they're encountering at a given moment.

RAHEL: Yes, even in English, this happened to me where, because, in the United States, we pronounce our R's, but in British English, they don't pronounce their R's. So my mother had a favorite saying was, that's a cock and bouillon. One day, I'm like, what does soup bouillon have to do with this phrase? And she said, what? I'm saying it's a cock and bull yarn. You know, it's a story that's, like, fantastic, it doesn't make sense, it's, like, made up. So even in English, I had to sort of decipher what language was being spoken with what accent and which way. But it just makes everything so interesting, and a lot of fun. And as we would say, shabash, like, well done. You know, it's a lot of fun.

SARAH: Shabash, what language is that?

RAHEL: That's Hindi.

SARAH: Okay, okay. Well, so before I let you go, is there anything else you want to share about your ancestral language, identity, and community?

RAHEL: You know, I just want to express my great gratitude to my parents. It wasn't a decision, I think, that could have been anticipated that my father having three daughters would decide that he really wanted to pass on, you know, the traditions and the things that were usually done by boys. But, I think because there were three girls, he didn't have a choice. Partly that, and partly because he had a great love of wanting to transmit everything that he could to us. And one of the phrases that is not specific to my family, but made much more sense because of the name Matsliach is the phrase, b'shem Hashem na'aseh venatzliach, in the name of God, let us do and let us be successful. And that is always very meaningful to me. And I think that is, you know, what I would conclude with.

SARAH: Oh, wow. Well, I'm really grateful for this interview and for all the work that you're doing to raise awareness about Indian and Baghdadi Jewish communities. And I am eager to organize a Jewish Language Project trip to India with you so that we can learn from you and learn about the history and the present community in India—communities. And I just want to thank you for all of your success, your being matzliach and by saying shabash.

RAHEL: Shabash. Thank you. Thank you. Alwiaki.

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