Podcast Transcript:
Dancing on the Same Page: Multilingual Calligraphy and Bridge-Building with Ruben Shimonov

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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 your host, Sarah Bunin Benor. Our guest today is Ruben Shimonov. Ruben is an educator, community builder, social entrepreneur, and artist who's passionate about Jewish diversity and intercultural understanding. He is the American Sephardi Federation's National Director of Education and Sephardi House, and he's the founding executive director of the Sephardic Mizrahi Q Network. As a visual artist, Ruben uses his multilingual Hebrew-Arabic-Persian calligraphy to build interfaith bridges and celebrate the diversity of the greater Sephardi world. He's given many lectures, including several for the Jewish Language Project, so I'm so glad that he is able to join us for an interview today. Ruben, welcome to Heritage Words.

RUBEN: Thank you so much, so glad to be here.

SARAH: So I want to start by asking you about your names.

RUBEN: My name, yeah, Ruben Shimonov. So my first name was given to me by, actually, my, my father, who just really loved this name. We don't have any relatives with the name Ruben, but he really loved it, so that's really just the story behind that name. Interestingly enough, actually, in Uzbekistan, Ruben was often seen as an Armenian Christian name. Here, we see it as a Jewish name, but over there, I remember my mother told me that my grandmother was nervous about me being given this name because it was associated over there with the Armenian community, but it's clearly a beautiful biblical name from the Torah. And Shimonov is, you know, in classic Bukharian tradition, many of our last names are often Jewish names and biblical names, with, then, the -ov at the end, which was, in a way, kind of forced upon us after the encounter with Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Prior to that, our names were, you know, just son of, son of, but then that suffix -ov was added after that Russian influence, so there's an ancestor who was Shimon, and then from there, I became Shimonov.

SARAH: Do you know who that ancestor was?

RUBEN: I actually don't. On my father's side, and the side where I get that last name, I know a little bit less about that side, but on my mother's side, her last name is Zaurov, and that actually came from originally Zevulunov. They made it a bit more ambiguous because Zaur, or Zaurov, was a name that both Jews and Muslims had, but before that, it was Zevulunov because there is an ancestor several generations back whose name was Zevulun Kulangi.

Kulangi was his, like, lakam we say in Bukharian Persian, like his nickname, but he was Zevulun, so then Zevulunov, and then with us, it became Zaurov.

SARAH: Hm. Okay, and so is your Hebrew name Reuven?

RUBEN: Yeah, yeah, Ruben and Reuven, I always make it a point to say that the way we spell it in English is R-U-B-E-N because when we came to America, we just phoneticized it. Only later did I realize that, apparently, the more common way is to spell it like the sandwich.

SARAH: Hmm, right. Okay, so from your response to that, it is clear that you are a Bukharian Jew, and you were born in Uzbekistan, right?

RUBEN: Yes, I was born in the capital of the country Tashkent in 1987, so I'm dating myself now, and my family and I, we immigrated, actually we came as refugees seeking asylum in 1993, in December ‘93, coming to New York, so I was six and a half years old when we left behind thousands of years of our deeply rooted history in Central Asia.

SARAH: At that point, what language did you speak—languages?

RUBEN: The primary language, especially, I would say, for me as a six-year-old boy, was actually the colonial language, it was Russian, especially because of the fact that we have been for several generations in Tashkent, in the country's capital. This city was designed to be like the, I don't know, the Moscow of Central Asia. It was a city that was heavily Russified, more so than maybe even other cities in the country, and Russian was the lingua franca, and it was also the language of education, of, you know, the professional sphere, social mobility, and so, many different ethnic groups that were not ethnically Russian were speaking it. And so our family, my family and my relatives in Tashkent especially, spoke Russian that much more so, whereas family in other cities might have spoken Russian, but also just as frequently spoken Bukharian Persian. So I would say that that was the primary language, but Bukharian, or what's known as Judeo-Tajik, which is a variant of Persian, Tajik is the Central Asian dialect of Persian, and Bukharian is the Jewish version of that. So, Bukharian essentially is Judeo-Central Asian Persian. That language or dialect was all around me, and I understood these words, except I didn't even realize that that was its own language. I just thought it was all part of one language, whatever it is that we were speaking was.

SARAH: Yeah.

RUBEN: So to answer your question, mainly Russian, but also a lot of that Bukharian Central Asian Persian influence.

SARAH: And when you say it was all around you, do you mean that your grandparents spoke it, and some of your friends, your neighbors—who in your community spoke it?

RUBEN: My family and relatives, the Jewish community. It was not spoken by other ethnic groups like Uzbeks or Russians or Ukrainians or Armenians. It is closely related to the Tajik Persian that is spoken by Muslims, and so that would be the next closest thing. But in Tashkent especially, cities like Samarkand and Bukhara have more of that ethnic Tajik presence. So it really was essentially, yeah, spoken by us, meaning the Bukharian Jewish

community, especially when we talk about the Jewish version of it. And within that world, there's also a generational factor that my grandparents' generation—I mean, that was like their conversational language, they knew it as well as—that was their native tongue. My parents' generation—again, I'm talking about for Tashkent Bukharian Jews, I can't speak for others—but my parents' generation, they would understand it quite well, but then speak it to various degrees of fluency. So, like, my mother understands Bukharian fully, fully, fully, fully, but sometimes struggles to speak it. And then my generation, we would, yes, kind of hear it here and there and pick up on certain words, but would be far less proficient in general, but I also must quickly mention that even within my generation, there are those who might, you know, be more proficient than others, but in general that would be the trend in a city like Tashkent.

SARAH: Yeah, and did your parents also, when they were speaking Russian to you, use a lot of words from Bukharian?

RUBEN: The Russian that we spoke, that was spoken to me and that I myself would speak, was very much mixed in with and infused with Bukharian, but so seamlessly that I didn't even know that we were using these loan words from another language. For me, it was just all part of what we spoke, I guess, Russian for a while. I mean, then later on, I was able to realize this cool code-switching phenomenon. But for a while, I didn't realize that. So, you know, some examples would be, you know, words for, well, obviously, for food, right, these words that we just kept how we say them in the Bukharian Judeo-Tajik language. But also, you know, things like 'stop,' and I can say them in a second in the language, or like 'enough,' or 'God willing'— different things like this that would just seamlessly be interwoven into our Russian. This is the Bukharian that really left an imprint on me, because that's what I would hear, and then I myself would mimic that and echo that, and keep on saying that so that, you know, even later on, when I started making Russian-speaking, non-Bukharian friends, whether other Russian-speaking Jews or non-Jewish, former Soviet folks, when I would speak to them, I would sometimes, you know, bring in these words just organically, and then they would say to me, what are you saying. That's when I would realize that words like bas, which means, like, 'enough,' or khodohad, which means 'God willing,' are not Russian.

SARAH: Right. I was trying to decide if what you grew up with was trans-languaging or loanwords. And it sounds like it was more loanwords than translanguaging, because translanguaging would be if the entire community had full access to a system that incorporated Russian and Bukharian together, like full sentences in each, but mixing in words from the other language in each language. But it sounds like it was more like Russian with a lot of words from Bukharian, right?

RUBEN: That was more my experience. But I would say, definitely, now that you mentioned that concept, among my grandparents' generation, it was a lot more translanguaging, where literally, it could be one full sentence in Bukharian, one full sentence in Russian, or half a sentence, not just putting in a word.

SARAH: Right.

RUBEN: And I would hear that as well. But I think what, just what stuck with me was more of the loanwords phenomenon. But definitely, somebody could tell a story, and just seamlessly

interweave full sentences in one language and another, or even mid-sentence. So that was also happening.

SARAH: Okay, let's get to the heritage words. And then I'll have lots more questions for you about how you engage with the language beyond words. So you mentioned a few, you said ‘stop’ or ‘enough’ is bas, is that right?

RUBEN: Bas, yeah. So bas, which is also actually, later on, when I then learned Arabic, I learned that it's also used in Arabic, it's used in Urdu, I think, also, and it either means, like, ‘stop,’ ‘enough,’ or, like, ‘however,’ all of those, kind of, like, you know, ‘but,’ or, yeah, ‘however’ statements. So we would say, for example, you know, if someone's pouring you tea, and you've had enough, you could say bas, bas, like, that's enough, that's good, stop. And then the other words that I said were—or phrase—was khodohad, which, if you really break it down, and again, I only found out what I'm about to tell you after learning standard literary Persian, the full phrase is agar khoda bekhaahad, if God wants it, Agar khoda bekhaahad, which then became khodo be kho’ad, and then khodo kho’ad, and then khodohad. Bukharian, especially dialectical Bukharian, written Judeo-Tajik, can be a lot more formal, but the conversational one, often, like, swallows words up. Another good example of that that I'll give as a heritage word, so I said, yeah, I said, khodohad—is a dish we have. So our version of a Shabbat stew is osvoh, and I just, again, for me, it was just osvoh, that's what it was, there was no, you know, etymology behind it, it was just, that's what it was. And then I realized that that is our sort of, like, us condensing the words oshi sabo. So ash in—or osh—actually, in our dialect—ash would be more Iranian Persian—is a meal, osh. Iranian Persians use it to mean, like, a soup or stew, but for us, any meal is osh. -i is like the smichut, the construct, right? So, and then saboh is from the Arabic sabah, which means morning, but we also use it to mean tomorrow. So oshi saboh means the meal for the next day, for tomorrow. But then, when you say it quickly enough, oshi saboh, oshi sabo, oshsvo, and some even make it shorter and say osvo, the sho just goes away, it's osvo. But that is another, you know, example of how we just, you know, took words and made them more, you know, condensed.

SARAH: Yeah, language is always changing. And we often don't know the etymologies of words that we say, like ‘goodbye,’ people may not know that comes from God be with you. And so it's a similar thing. And so how did you learn those original etymologies?

RUBEN: And by the way, very quickly, I mean, then even ‘goodbye’ can become ‘g’bye’ for some, right? G’bye!

SARAH: Yeah, or just ‘bye.’ Yeah.

RUBEN: Yeah. So the way that I learned this was, in college, one of my majors was Middle Eastern Studies. And as part of that major, I was taking foreign language courses. I had exhausted all the classes I could take on Hebrew, so then I was doing Arabic, and simultaneously, I didn't have to—I already, you know, fulfilled the requirements—but I also then took Persian. And the reason behind, you know, for me, I wanted to take Persian, because it was my attempt to deepen my knowledge of my own ancestral language, which, yes, admittedly, we have a specific dialect of it. But also, through that, connect to the broader Persianate world, that connects our, you know, Bukharian community to that of Afghanistan,

the Jewish community of Afghanistan, to that of Iran, of Azerbaijan. But what I didn't realize, until I did, was that what we were learning was this standard literary Iranian Persian. So many things that I was learning, they did, like, click, because I was thinking, oh my gosh, yeah, this word that I thought was whatever language is Persian, but then other words I would come to my grandfather, and I would say them, and he would either say, we don't have this word, or he would say, wow, you're speaking in such a beautiful literary way. But given that training, I guess, and the studying I was doing, I was able to start, you know, kind of breaking down the etymology of words. And then also learning, at the same time, concurrently, Arabic helped a lot as well, because I think they say about as high as maybe 40%, something like that, of Persian loan words are from Arabic. So learning Arabic also helped me with some of these words that we have that we use.

SARAH: Yeah, and did you also learn how to read Arabic and Persian?

RUBEN: Yeah, that was, you know, because these were university-level courses, reading and writing was important. That was really, again, for my general interest, because I already at that point had known that the way in which we would write Judeo-Tajik, Persian, Bukharian, traditionally was in Hebrew script, and then later in Cyrillic or Latin script. We never used the Perso-Arabic script, but I myself really wanted to learn that. And furthermore, learning that script in a way, on a personal level, connected me even more to the region that I'm from, where the Arabic, Perso-Arabic script was all around us, you know, beautiful mosques and mausolea, that the legacy of that writing system is, you know, found throughout Central Asia.

SARAH: Yeah. So have you been there? Have you been to Tashkent since you left when you were a kid?

RUBEN: Yeah, great question. If you were to ask me this question two and a half years ago, I would have said that all these years, all these decades, I haven't been back yet, and I yearn to go back, but in May of 2023, my mother and I, we went back for the first time in essentially 30 years. Yeah. And it was a very multi-layered trip. On the one hand, it was wonderful and exciting and fun and something very special for me to do with my mother. And then there were also, you know, the parts that were a bit more emotional or a bit more difficult, like really realizing that our community essentially, our presence there is profoundly dwindling. The majority of Bukharian Jews do not live there. What is left are, at best, you know, different sites, but even some of those, like we wanted to see the home where my great-grandmother lived, that home isn't there anymore. Cemeteries are well-preserved. Jews are able to go back and visit safely. And that's not lost on me. But realistically, in terms of, like, the future of our community, the future of our community is in this new diaspora. And we're thriving, but that part was—was difficult to see how it's, you know, really coming to an end. And the other thing, like, for my mom, it was very difficult to see a city that was unrecognizable. I was very young. I don't remember so much of the actual city. I remember the home in which we lived, but for her, that was hard in Tashkent. But once we were in Samarkand and Bukhara, which is where, you know, we have more distant, temporally, like, ancestry, over there, it was just all really lovely and exciting for us because it's not like we could look at the Bukharian quarter and be like, ah, there goes the neighborhood or something. But in Tashkent, my mother really felt like, this is a city that's unrecognizable. You can't—you can never go home again, you know?

SARAH: Mm. Wow. Are there any Bukharian writings that you can see when you go to any of those cities that you visited?

RUBEN: So, in Bukhara and Samarkand, maybe also in Tashkent, but in Bukhara and Samarkand, I had the blessing of visiting the synagogues in those cities that are somewhat active. Like, I don't know—we need a special term for that. They're definitely not like museums, which I'm so happy that they're not that much of a relic of the past, but they're also not, you know, open for daily services or Shabbat. Often it's when there's, like, a significant, you know, critical mass of people that come that they will open the synagogue. But in those batei knesset, in those synagogues—and by the way, here's another heritage word, kenisa. Kenisa is a word that I grew up with for synagogue. And later I realized that, okay, it sort of sounds like beit knesset, but it didn't come directly from that. It came from kenisa in Persian, which itself comes from kenis/kenisa in Arabic, which comes from knesset. Kenisa is how we refer to synagogue. The old synagogues over there, I asked them, I said, do you have these like genizah store rooms where you have older Bukharian books? And lo and behold, they showed me these rooms that are collecting a bunch of dust. They are, you know, sadly not really well maintained, but I was able to touch with my hands, you know, incredible, you know, hundred-plus-year-old books that are written in our distinct Judeo-Tajik language using the Hebrew script, using our vocalization with the vowels. There was a certain kind of golden age of Bukharian literature, and some of these books exhibit that. I wanted to take them back with me so badly. I couldn't, but I still have this idea, I have this dream of going back, getting the appropriate funds, and really salvaging these books.

SARAH: Mm. And you think these are books that don't have copies in Jerusalem or New York?

RUBEN: I'm sure some of them do have copies. First of all, even those copies, there are not that many of them. But yeah, some of them, there are copies in Jerusalem, more so, I would say, yeah, in the Ben-Zvi Institute in Israel or the Anu Museum, and some in New York. Some of them have also been digitized, but again, not so many. And that's only the ones that have been, you know, where there are copies. There are also perhaps many books that don't have many copies at all. So it's something that, thankfully, there is enough out there that's accessible, that's been preserved for us to look at. Some of it, I know, you know, I shared with you for the website, but for every one of those books, there's so many that are not.

SARAH: Yeah, well, I should just tell our listeners that you've contributed so much to the Jewish Language Project in terms of materials that you've shared with us and are now available on our website, and the calligraphy that you've done, we'll get to that in a minute. And so, thank you for all that, but it sounds like what you're calling for is really a Bukharian version of the Yiddish Book Center, where books would be collected and digitized to be made available to future generations.

RUBEN: Yeah, so hopefully a multi-millionaire is listening right now and will fund that.

SARAH: Yes, we would be happy to facilitate that and provide whatever support and infrastructure is needed. So, thank you. Well, okay, let's turn to your calligraphy. Tell us how you got into calligraphy and what work you've done with it.

RUBEN: Yeah. First and foremost, my passion for my multilingual Hebrew-Arabic-Persian calligraphy comes from my own multilingual background. So, having grown up with different languages—I haven't even gotten into, you know, then also learning and becoming proficient in Spanish. And there's other stuff there as well—growing up in a Ladino community, the Ladino-speaking community in Seattle. But being surrounded by various different languages and thinking multilingually has always been part of my reality. Specifically, languages of the greater Middle East really resonate with me, because of not just my multilingual background, but my background as a Bukharian Mizrachi Sephardi Jew. And so, for me, creating artistic works that elevate three important languages of the region—Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian—were both an expression of my identity, also a way to raise awareness about the beautiful diversity of the greater Sephardi world, the fact that Arabic and Persian have been languages spoken by Jews and are Jewish languages as much as Yiddish or Ladino, that's important. And then the third part was using art—and I truly believe in what I'm about to say—using art as a way of building genuine bridges and breaking down walls between different communities, particularly communities that often have far more in common with each other than they think they might. On that last point, what I want to quickly say is, this is very much a passion of mine, to be in interfaith spaces and to help build and nourish and enrich interfaith community, particularly Jewish-Muslim interfaith community, because that is also a natural expression of my Bukharian identity. My community's culture developed against the backdrop over the last 1,300 years of our history, against the backdrop of Islamic societies and cultures and empires, and against the backdrop of this intellectual-cultural-social interaction between Muslims and Jews. And so for me, it's always just been very natural and organic to be in interfaith spaces. It's not something, you know, exotic or woke, or I don't know what, it feels natural for me. And so my art is a way to bring myself and bring some added value and something, you know, something unique to these interfaith spaces. I really believe we can harness art a lot more, art and culture, in Muslim-Jewish interfaith work, and so this is my way of addressing that and bringing in languages that have been used by Muslims and Jews throughout the centuries.

SARAH: Mm. Beautiful. And I encourage our listeners to check out Ruben's work. Is there a website where your work is displayed?

RUBEN: I'm not that tech savvy, but I do have a relatively active Instagram page, @_wordsinmotion_ is the handle. It's literally just my calligraphy pieces. And one thing I actually see now, remembering, one other very quick thing is that for me, what's very important is not just creating pieces with these languages, but creating pieces in which the languages are juxtaposed on one page, creating pieces where the languages are talking to one another, dancing with one another on the same page in a seamless way as a way of showing the deep connections between them. I always say that what I lack maybe in expertise, because there are definitely scribes and calligraphy artists way better than me, but hopefully I make up for it in my unique approach. And this is something I really haven't seen, of bringing the languages together on one piece and really coming full circle. A couple of years ago, I was asked by the State Department, by the ambassador to Uzbekistan, the U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, he asked me to contribute some of my pieces to the embassy in Uzbekistan. And so when I visited with my mother a couple of years ago, I saw my pieces there in the ambassador's home. And on that same trip where I saw my pieces exhibited in this beautiful home, I also led a calligraphy workshop with a whole bunch of Uzbek and Tajik

Muslim teenagers. And that just proved to me, once again, the power of art in building bridges. Here I was, a Bukharian Jew in Uzbekistan, but also in the U.S. embassy, really holding all the layers of my identity there through my art.

SARAH: Mm. That is so beautiful, both the art and also the workshops that you did. Thank you for sharing that. So you've also worked for several Jewish organizations. Tell us about those and specifically how you've infused Bukharian.

RUBEN: Yeah, sure. I think we probably have time for me to speak about my most recent, the organization that I work for right now, which is the American Sephardi Federation. I am the National Director of Education for the American Sephardi Federation, a 50-plus-year-old organization that's been doing the important and valuable work of elevating and celebrating the rich cultures, intellectual tradition, history of the greater Sephardi world as an integral part of the Jewish experience. So that's the mission of ASF. Andwithin that organization, I wear the hat of, kind of, the senior educator. And a lot of different initiatives are within my portfolio, but the most important of them is being the director of Sephardi House, a year-long fellowship for Sephardic and Mizrahi college students from across the country. We gather a group of roughly 30 students every year. It's a competitive program, so we have stellar students from across the country who partake in this experience where they basically deepen their knowledge of the greater Sephardic and Mizrahi world, but also bring in their own voice into that. It's ultimately leadership development, community building, and educational experience. And so, the way in which my Bukharian identity and the Bukharian language shows up in my work at the ASF and as an educator is, firstly, I'm often invited both by my organization and others that then partner with our organization to speak on the rich history of Bukharian Jews. And when I give these talks, a very important part of my presentation is talking about the role of language in our community and the story that that tells when we really focus on Bukharian and all of the influences within that language, because Bukharian actually has Uzbek influence in there, also some Russian influence, obviously Persian and Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic. So it really tells a story. So that's one way in which I would say my Bukharianness shows up are the classes that I give. And the other way is just me being sensitive to and really enthusiastic about lifting up Jewish pride through the lens of language, right? So some of my students, let's say, you know, Syrian Jewish students or Iraqi Jewish students, they're really excited to learn more about Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Baghdadi Arabic, the Arabic spoken in Aleppo, or if I have Kavkazi students, about Juhuri. And I think if I did not have the connection that I have to my own heritage and—and language, I would not have the tools or the, you know, sensitivity to create a space for them to do that exploration as well.

SARAH: Mm. So yeah, it sounds like they're interested in learning their ancestral languages, but maybe you're also encouraging them to engage with their languages through heritage words based on your calligraphy. And, I don't know, do you actually talk about that?

RUBEN: Yeah, well, that's another thing. We also—we have an annual Shabbaton where, like, one of the big hits every year is the calligraphy workshop that I do, the Hebrew-Arabic-Persian calligraphy workshop. I often then get invited to their Hillels or universities to do that. But yeah, it comes up organically when we're talking about holiday traditions and foods, different songs that are sung, because some of them are in our ancestral languages. And then also just, you know, my nerdy way of making connections

between languages and etymologies and grammar, like all those things, syntax. It just is infused into my teaching, into my pedagogy.

SARAH: Yeah. And you also worked previously at Queen's College Hillel.

RUBEN: Yes.

SARAH: And there's a large Bukharian population there. Did you infuse Bukharian in your work there?

RUBEN: A hundred percent. When I was working there, an important part of my role was to engage the underserved, but very present Bukharian Jewish student body at Queen's College Hillel. And I'm very proud to say that after being there for several years, we really created an environment at Queen's College Hillel, an environment in which the Bukharian Jewish experience just became part of the broader Jewish experience, where students who were Bukharian felt like they had a place, and where other students felt like they could explore the beautiful diversity of Jewish life by learning more about, you know, the Bukharian Jewish culture, Persian Jewish culture. One important way in which I created a space where the Bukharian Jewish students felt more at home, and an important way in which we engaged all students in learning about Bukharian Jewish culture and history was through language. So, for example, the monthly events that we would have for the Bukharian Cultural Club, which is a club I helped, kind of, revamp when I was there, we called these monthly events that were open to everybody, the Bukharian Chaikhana Lunch Hour. Chaikhana, it's not an exclusively Bukharian Jewish word, it's a Tajik and also Persian word—means tea house, chaikhana, tea house. And we intentionally wanted to call it that, both to make it familiar to Bukharian Jewish students who otherwise might not have thought Hillel was for them, but also for other students to ask, huh, what is this word? Okay, we know what lunch hour means, that's good, and Bukharian, so it's still accessible, but what is Chaikhana? And it allowed us to then talk about what is an important part of, I would just say, Central Asian culture in general, which is tea house culture, and how so much of our interactions and conversations and community building historically has happened in the tea house.

SARAH: And I guess most of the students wouldn't be fluent in Bukharian or even know much of it. I mean, they were probably speakers of English and Russian, right, primarily?

RUBEN: This is actually what's interesting. You would think that, but not necessarily at all. I remember one of my star students, she was the president of the club. Her knowledge of Bukharian was impeccable. And that's because her family came from Bukhara. Another student of mine, his family came from Samarkand or Shahrisabz or Navoi, these other cities where Bukharian was still very much front and center, even during Soviet times. So I was actually quite impressed to see how much they were really schooling me. But yeah, then you had others who followed, kind of, the trend that you described, but it really, really depends. I also realized that some of my students whose family came from Israel before coming to the U.S., and prior to that were in Central Asia, often they were more proficient in Bukharian. And they would then be, could I say, quadilingual? What's the word for that?

SARAH: Quadrilingual, maybe?

RUBEN: Quadrilingual. Yeah. Knowing Hebrew, Russian, Bukharian, and English quite well. And that's a whole other phenomenon that we need to do more investigation about the Israeli experience and how that has added, you know, another layer to the story, especially those Israeli Bukharians who ultimately then come to Miami or New York.

SARAH: Mm. Yeah, that's true. There's some comparative research about Juhuri or Judeo-Tat in Israeli and American Juhuro communities, Ronald Shabtaev and his colleagues, but I don't know of similar research for Bukharian. So I'd love to see that, if any listeners are interested in working on that, I'm happy to support them. So what about Russian? That's basically your native language, but you haven't really talked much about activism around that language. Do you feel a particular connection to Russian?

RUBEN: It's a great question. And let me- let me put it like this. Yes, Russian is still—I don't want to completely minimize it. Look, I know earlier I said this is the colonial language. It's not the language of our deeply rooted history in Central Asia. At the same time, over the last 100-plus years, over the course of the last century, it has been an important part of our community, whether we like it or not, right? We write in it. We still speak in it. And for me, I'm not going to ignore it just because of its history or, kind of, more colonial history. It's an important part of our community. It's something I lean into particularly as a way to connect to other RSJs, Russian-speaking Jews. It's been an incredible way for me to connect with Jews from Ukraine, from Latvia, from Azerbaijan, from Georgia, from Russia, Belarus. And also to just connect to a big chunk of the world that speaks Russian because of the Soviet experience, whether they're Jewish or not. And so I have used it a lot in my community-building work. I have used it a lot in engaging with, let's say, yeah, Kavkazi Jews, Georgian Jews, and also just in continuing to be a global citizen and connecting with different folks. So it very much shows up not just in my life as someone who speaks multiple languages and can converse with somebody in a taxi or whatnot, but specifically, I would say, in my professional world, it shows up when I am engaging the sizable RSJ community or segment of the American Jewish world.

SARAH: Yeah. And do you also connect to Persian and Kavkazi Jews through your languages that are all similar in some ways?

RUBEN: A hundred percent. Yes. It’s a very powerful way in which I make those connections to, well, first of all, more broadly, the Persianate world, including folks of different religious backgrounds, but within the Jewish world, a hundred percent it's a way for me to connect more, kind of, intimately to Afghan Jews, to Jews of Iran, and to Jews of Azerbaijan, comparing different words and different expressions, and finding those similarities. You know, language is often a powerful way to, kind of, very quickly become close with someone.

SARAH: Yeah. So, Bukharian has been labeled endangered, but it sounds like the way you're talking about it, it doesn't seem as endangered as I've heard in the past. Like, if there are people who were college students 10 years ago who were fluent in it, that's not really endangered. What do you think?

RUBEN: My humble subjective opinion is that our language is in this interesting liminal space right now, where on the one hand, it's a vulnerable language right now because of

just, I would say, mainly, our uprootedness from Central Asia, right? And everything that comes with that. At the same time, there have been and continue to be really intentional efforts and attempts to preserve and celebrate it, both within the community and outside. And there is still a high enough level of folks speaking into various levels of proficiency. And so there is a kind of a trajectory, and there is a momentum moving in a certain direction that's hard to fight in the immigrant experience. But there is also concerted effort to really address these issues and intervene. And so what I would say is, it's definitely vulnerable, but I am inspired by the different ways in which both within our community and outside, and I got to tip my hat off to you, Dr. Benor, for that, the different attempts to preserve, celebrate, and elevate our language and its importance for our community.

SARAH: And so would you like to see a program where young people have the opportunity to learn Bukharian from elders?

RUBEN: Those programs have existed. I don't know exactly which ones are—exist right now, but I know as recently as, like, 10 years ago, there were community members who were leading different programs at synagogues and community centers, publishing primers and different, like, phrase books. So that was great. And yeah, I would love to see the continuation of that.

SARAH: Yeah, so the Jewish Language Project has piloted a mentor-learner program with Judeo-Baghdadi Arabic, but we would like to—pending funding—expand to other languages, and Bukharian is definitely at the top of our list of languages that I think there's enough interest in for young people to want to learn it. And in that program, we match a learner with a native speaker to be their mentor, and they meet—

RUBEN: Wonderful.

SARAH: —a certain number of times in a supported environment. And the pilot program was great, and I really hope that we can expand to Bukharian.

RUBEN: Wow, beautiful. Again, another example of the cutting-edge, important work that y'all are doing.

SARAH: Thank you. So before I let you go, what else do you want to tell us about your ancestral identity, language, culture, et cetera?

RUBEN: I will end with the way that we say goodbye, or the way I grew up hearing that being said, and the way that I say it. I think it's really beautiful, the way that it is said. So this is what I will end with. Bukharians say salomat boshed, which means ‘be in health.’ And for me, I think that’s such a beautiful way to bid adieu, is to essentially say goodbye with a blessing. I guess, sort of like God be with you, that was also a blessing. So I would just like to end with that phrase, salomat boshed, goodbye, be in health, be healthy, and let's continue to celebrate, you know, the beautiful linguistic diversity of the Jewish people.

SARAH: Wow, and that is the same as the Yiddish phrase of goodbye, zay gezunt, which also means be in health, my ancestral language.

RUBEN: Beautiful.

SARAH: So may we be in health, and may we all continue to do this important work. Thank you, Ruben.

RUBEN: Amen. Thank you so much.

SARAH: Heritage Words is a partnership of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Language Project and HUC Connect, supported by tax-deductible donations from listeners like you. I'm the producer and host, Sarah Bunin Benor. Kyle Elbaz Fingerhut is assistant producer, Avishay Artsy is editor, and Talia Ehrenberg is video editor. The music is from Maurice El Medioni's French and Algerian Arabic album "Cafe Oran," featuring the Klezmatics' David Krakauer and Frank London, courtesy of Piranha Records. This podcast is one of the many ways the Jewish Language Project raises awareness about the diversity of the Jewish people and the phenomenon of heritage words. We also have online crowdsourced dictionaries where you can find the words mentioned on the podcast. Our social media posts include Music Mondays, Jewish word of the week, and fun facts, and we offer free educational materials and exhibits that you can visit online or display in a synagogue, museum, or community center. Contact us about our live tapings, study tours, and sponsorship opportunities. Looking for gifts for Shabbat dinners and Passover Seders? Check out our whimsical and educational T-shirts, tote bags, posters, stickers, and aprons. You can find all this content and donate, volunteer, or sign up for our email list at jewishlanguages.org. Thank you, mersi muncho, ilaha yavilokh, a sheynem dank, shukran, soghboshi, todah rabah.