



With the change of government in Libya, there was hope that Jews would again find a place in the country. But unfortunately, there have arisen signs of continued hatred against Jews. David Gerbi attempted to clean a long-shuttered synagogue but only to find its doors locked once more.

David Gerbi, a Jungian psychotherapist in his late 50s, who was born in Tripoli but went at age 12 into exile in Italy after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war spurred attacks on Tripoli Jews. Gerbi had traveled a number of times back to Libya over the past 10 years, driven by a desire to restore the two-millennium-old Jewish-Libyan heritage and return to his erstwhile home as a free citizen..

After a week of volunteer service in the Benghazi Psychiatric Hospital last May, helping to treat victims of post-traumatic stress syndrome, Gerbi was the first Libyan Jew to [proclaim his support for the National Transitional Council rebels](#)

. Gerbi has sought a position representing exiled Jews in the NTC, which is struggling to form a transitional government, and hopes to secure the return of property confiscated from Libyan Jews, some 38,000 of whom were forced out in 1969.

On 1 October 2011, Gerbi returned to Tripoli. With the help of a U.S. security contractor and the permission of NTC fighters and three local sheikhs, Gerbi hammered down with a sledgehammer a brick wall erected to block the entrance to the city's historic Dar Bishi Synagogue, said a prayer and cried. He told reporters that he planned to fix up the dilapidated Jewish place of worship, unused since Gaddafi expelled Libya's small Jewish community early in his decades-long rule.

[He declared](#) it a "historic day" for Libya and told the crowd gathered there, "This is for all those who suffered under Gaddafi." "I plan to restore the synagogue," the Jewish psychologist declared. "I plan to get the passport back, I plan to resolve the problem of the confiscated property, individual and collective. I plan to help rebuild Libya, to do my part."

" [What Gaddafi tried to do](#) is to eliminate the memory of us. He tried to eliminate the amazing language. He tried to eliminate the religion of the Jewish people," said Gerbi, "I want bring our legacy back, I want to give a chance to the Jewish of Libya to come back."

The star of David is still visible inside and outside the peach-coloured Dar al-Bishi synagogue in Tripoli's walled Old City. An empty ark where Torah scrolls were once kept still reads Shema Israel (Hear, O Israel) in faded Hebrew. But graffiti is painted on the walls, and the floor and upper chambers are covered in garbage – plastic water bottles, clothes, mattresses, drug paraphernalia and dead pigeon carcasses.

It took Gerbi weeks to get permission from Libya's new rulers to begin restoring the synagogue, which is part of his broader goal of promoting tolerance for Jews and other religions in a new Libya. He and a team of helpers carted in brooms, rakes and buckets to prepare to clean it out.

David Gerbi told reporters he was trying to resume cleaning at the long-shuttered synagogue the next day, only to find its door locked. Residents of the area then warned him to flee, he said.

Not only was he barred by local gunmen from returning to the site the following day A man came and said, 'You need to stop now. There are men coming with guns and you will be killed,'" said Gerbi, wearing a T-shirt emblazoned "I Love Libya" and holding a scroll inscribed with "Yahweh", the Hebrew word for God.

A companion of Gerbi's said four men armed with rifles had come to the synagogue as he tried to enter. Gerbi, who cultivated ties with Libya's ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) during the uprising that toppled Gadhafi, said the incident would force the NTC to confront anti-Jewish prejudice following its pledges to build a democratic state that respects civil and human rights following decades of dictatorship.

"It needs to be clear if it's a racist country or a free country," he said. "The door has been closed again ... it's happened to so many generations. It's a symbolic act."

"Jalal el-Gallal, an NTC spokesman, said Gerbi's efforts to restore the synagogue were premature because the government is still temporary and revolutionary forces are fighting Gaddafi supporters on two major fronts. "I think it's just creating a lot more complications at the moment," he said. One endorsement Gerbi has received is from the synagogue neighbourhood's main sheik, who also offered him protection.

In 2011, elements opposed to Gaddafi demonstrated a distinct divide in their stance toward Libyan Jews. Anti-Jewish sentiment has marked the uprising against Gadhafi and its aftermath, in which graffiti invoking an alleged Jewish strand in Gadhafi's lineage has sprung up on walls across the capital. NBC News correspondent Richard Engel, covering the conflict, estimated that as many as one in five of the rebel fighters had taken up arms against Gaddafi out of the belief that the Libyan strongman is secretly Jewish.

[Libya's Berber rebels have embraced](#) Gerbi with special appreciation for his Jewish background. The Berber rebels prefer to be called Amazigh (plural – Imazighen) as they prefer to be called, which means "free humans" or "free men". On Monday, after he was ejected from the synagogue, a [Berber leader counseled](#) Mr. Gerbi to pursue a more diplomatic and quieter strategy as he seeks to sway Libya's new leadership to adopt a more accommodating posture to Libyan Jews.

Gerbi was reportedly warmly received by Amazigh rebels in the Nafusa Mountains in August 2011, and an Amazigh NTC official was quoted as saying, "We want to create closer relations between Muslims and Jews. Without Jews we will never be a strong country.

Fahdel Hshad, an Amazigh whom David Gerbi met at the Benghazi Tibesti Hotel with other NTC members. Hshad and other Amazigh NTC members escorted Gerbi to the Amazigh town of Jado in western Libya where, during World War II, Italian Fascists and others erected a concentration camp that interned 2,600 Jews.

Gerbi was warmly welcomed by the chairmen of town councils, all members of the NTC, respectively: Moussa Younes of Jado, Dr. Mustafa Razabani of Rajban and Tayeb Ahmed of

Jefren along with the general population who recalled the good things their grandparents had told them about Jews.

Gerbi was brought to the Jewish Cemetery where headstones lie in disarray, with a couple of Hebrew inscriptions on fragments. He recited a symbolic Kaddish over Ner Neshamot (Yahrzeit candles) on a child's tomb, lighting three candles in memory of the Jewish dead, including approximately 600 interned men, women and children who died of typhoid in the camp during WWII.

The Amazigh National Transitional Council members offered Gerbi the possibility of fencing off the cemetery and restoring the tombs.

“Our two peoples have much in common,” Mahmoud Tabib said. “We want to create closer relations between Muslims and Jews. Without Jews we will never be a strong country.” He recalled stories of friendships with Jews he had heard from his grandparents and noted the Jewish kinship of names such as Ya’kub (Jacob), Jounis (Jonah), Moussa (Moses), Hannah, Zaccaria etc.

NTC spokesman Salem Badrani aims to “give voice to the voiceless” in the new constitution, inserting guarantees of respect for Amazigh language, culture and education that was repressed and prohibited by Gaddafi. The Amazigh feel they lived an experience similar to that of the Marranos, and have not succeeded in making themselves heard in the past. They now want to become visible, reclaiming full rights to their ancestral identity.

[The history of the Jews in Libya](#) stretches back to the 3rd century BCE, when Cyrenaica was under Greek rule. During the Greco-Roman period Libya corresponded approximately with Cyrene and the territory belonging to it. Jews lived there - including many that moved there from Egypt; In 73 BC during the First Jewish-Roman War in Iudaea Province, there was also a revolt by the Jewish community in Cyrene led by Jonathan the Weaver, which was quickly suppressed by the governor Catullus. In 115, another Jewish revolt broke out not only in Cyrene, but also in Egypt and Cyprus.

During this early history, strong [alliances developed between Jews and Berbers](#) . Jews moved from Egypt and Cyrenaica to the Barbary States after the expulsion of the Jews from Alexandria

by Bishop Cyril in 414. As a result of the Emperor Justinian's intolerant policies in the sixth century, Jews were driven inland, and again found refuge among the hinterland Berber tribesmen. The Berbers not only welcomed the Jews, but eight of the tribes, impressed with the erudition and technological acumen of the Jews, disavowed their shamanistic, pagan concepts and adopted Judaism

In the year 694, when the rampaging Arab armies drove relentlessly westward along the Barbary Coast, the Jews found themselves allied with the Berbers against the invasion. The confederacy of Jewish Berber tribes rallied around the Jewish/Berber priestess Kahena. The Berbers crowned Kahena as queen, and accepted her as their military leader.

After the Arab conquest, converted Jews and Berbers became a significant part of the Arab forces which invaded Iberia. The Berber/Arab successful invasion of Iberia, and thereafter for maintaining their hegemony over the conquered region of Iberia, was made possible only by the assistance and collaboration of both the Sephardim and the formerly Berber Jews.

Arab chroniclers record that the conquerors entrusted the garrisoning of such important cities as Elvira, Seville, and Cordoba to the Jews while the invaders pressed on in hot pursuit of the fleeing Christian forces. The gates to the strategic city of Toledo were opened by Jews on a Palm Sunday when the Christians were attending church services. Jews regained the right to practice their faith and the Jewish populations of North African towns soon burgeoned with new, vibrant Jewish communities.

In 1911, Libya was colonized by Italy. By 1931, there were 21,000 Jews living in the country (4% of the total population of 550,000), mostly in Tripoli. In the late 1930s, the Fascist Italian regime began passing anti-Semitic laws. Despite this repression, 25% of the population of Tripoli was still Jewish in 1941 and 44 synagogues were maintained in the city.

Some of the worst anti-Jewish violence occurred in the years following the liberation of North Africa by Allied troops. From November 5 to November 7, 1945, more than 140 Jews were killed and many more injured in a pogrom in Tripoli. The rioters looted nearly all of the city's synagogues and destroyed five of them, along with hundreds of homes and businesses. In June 1948, anti-Jewish rioters killed another 12 Jews and destroyed 280 Jewish homes.

By 1967, the Jewish population of Libya had decreased to 7,000. After the Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors, Libyan Jews were once again the target of anti-Jewish riots. During these attacks, rioters killed 18 people and more were injured.[5] Leaders of the Jewish community then asked King Idris I to allow the entire Jewish population to "temporarily" leave the country; he consented, even urging them to leave.

By the time Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi came to power in 1969 only about 100 Jews remained in Libya. Under his rule, all Jewish property was confiscated, and all debts to Jews were cancelled. Despite emigration being prohibited, most Jews succeeded in escaping the country and by 1974, only 20 Jews remained in Libya.