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Bubbling Up Across Holy Land

How a Palestinian Brewer Transformed Israel's Beer Culture

By Jamie Levin and Sarah Treleaven

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Shapiro and his many siblings — all involved in the eponymous brewery — are relatively new to the Israeli craft brew scene; they celebrated their first anniversary on August 16. But the path they took is a familiar one: They fell in love with American craft brews and decided to bring them home to Israel.

“Our oldest brother was living in Milwaukee about 15 years ago and used to come back and complain that we don’t have any good beer here,” said Shapiro. “He brought a brew-your-own beer kit and we started just for fun.” Shapiro later spent four months stateside, picking up the trade from local craft brewers: “I went to Colorado to see what things looked like outside my parents’ bathtub.”

Sagy, of Alexander Brewery, was looking to start a business of his own when he retired from the Israeli Air Force and decided to build on his love of beer. “I was making beer at home, and the beer that I wanted to start with were the beers I love myself,” he explained. “I really like the craft brews of America, and I’ve been influenced because I like the taste.”

Much like Taybeh, many Israeli craft beers have flavors that are unmistakably American. The beers are extremely bitter and hoppy, often finishing with an almost skunky flavor. “The Germans make really good lagers but they’re a little bit boring, and same with the British,” said Shapiro. “We are trying to make some different.”

Harley Zipori, who blogs about beer for the website IsraelSeen.com, says that the Israeli craft brewing industry has been influenced by more than just the taste of American beers. “There’s [also] the influence of the industry, which started from nothing in a culture which barely knew anything about beer and got to where they are today,” explained Zipori. “That gave them a model in terms of emulating craft breweries and going out and marketing it.”

While Israeli craft brewers are quick to pay homage to their American roots, not all are so quick to concede that Taybeh was truly the first of this kind in Israel. “We were the first craft beer in the whole Middle East,” said Khoury, “and now there are over 20 microbrews in Israel. They followed in my footsteps.” Zipori acknowledges that Taybeh was indeed the

first craft brewery in the area. “But it’s the Middle East,” he said. “It’s not so easy to cross either the borders or the cultural divides.”

Despite these barriers, many of those in the forefront of the Israeli craft-brewing movement have visited Khoury’s brewery to learn from him. Shapiro overcame his reluctance to visit the occupied territories in order to visit Khoury’s brewery. He walked away with both enhanced respect for Khoury’s operations and a plan for a joint Israeli-Palestinian beer. “It would be good for me and good for him,” Shapiro opined.

When asked about Shapiro’s idea, Khoury equivocated. “I don’t know if my people are ready for a joint beer,” he said. But despite the persistent gulfs between Israelis and Palestinians, Khoury is happy to help: “I don’t mind sharing my knowledge because I was helped and supported by many home brewers. I want to give [Israelis] the education and support that I had.”

Nevertheless, Shapiro is optimistic: “Everyone loves beer. I believe beer will bring the peace.”

Jamie Levin is a PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of Toronto. He has contributed to Haaretz, the Jerusalem Post and the National Post.

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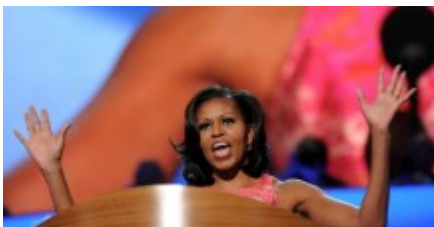
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