



Rabbi Menahem Barkahan  
next to his father's portrait

A week before the **Jewish New Year**, which falls on September 18 this year, the Shamir Latvian Jewish community will organize a weeklong music festival aimed at introducing the public to Jewish music. If, before the event, only the rare few not directly connected with Jewish culture knew that klezmer is a musical style in **Yiddish culture** characterized by mournful, screeching clarinet sounds, then the organizers of the event hope that, following the festival, many more people will know about klezmer music.

TEXT: **INESE TAMSONE**  
PHOTO: **KASPARS GOBA**

# Reviving the Past

**S**hamir is a Jewish religious community that has worked for several years to research and preserve Latvian Jewish history. Today there are about 10,000 Jews in Latvia, approximately one-tenth of whom consider themselves religious.

At the Jewish music festival audiences will hear Jewish liturgical chants performed by men's choirs, as well as Jewish folk music and Spanish Sephardi songs. Separate concerts are planned for women and children. The biggest event of the festival is a concert entitled "5770," at the Latvian Opera on September 10. According to the Jewish calendar, 5770 is the number of the coming year. The concert will not only unveil the festival, it will also be a beautiful conclusion to a six-year-long project, "Synagogues in Latvia 1918 – 1944," which has produced several books, sets of postcards and educational events, as well as uncovered and revitalized songs that were once performed at synagogues in pre-war Latvia.

"We want to show everything positive that existed here in Latvia before the war," says the leader of the Shamir Latvian Jewish community, Rabbi Menachem Barkahan. He is a member of one of the few ancient Jewish families that have lived here for centuries. Rabbi Menachem's father, Nathan Barkan (1923 – 2003), was the first chief rabbi in the renewed Latvian state; he received the highest award in Latvia, the Order of the Three Stars, for his contribution to the study of history and to cultural life.

Menachem Barkahan spent his first twenty years in Latvia, where he received a Soviet education with a strong Russification tendency, in accordance with the ideology of the time. He left Latvia in 1969, but after thirty years in Israel and Germany Rabbi Barkahan returned to his homeland to finish a book begun by his father, *Latvia: Synagogues and Rabbis, 1918 – 1940*. The work is an extensive collection of historical evidence, based on photographs of Jewish buildings and rabbis compiled over the course of many years. The book was published in five languages – Russian, English, German, Latvian, and Hebrew. The book was completed and published, and even named the best designed

Latvian book of 2004. Nevertheless, Rabbi Menachem decided to remain in Latvia. Being as resourceful and passionate organizer, he immediately got to work on new projects. The result of one of these projects – historically precise models of twenty-three former Latvian synagogues – is currently on display at the home of the Shamir community. These models were designed by Latvian artists and craftsmen based on historical photographs of the original buildings.

"Melodies of Burned Synagogues" is a project that will continue all year long. As part of the project, melodies once heard in synagogues were sought out and compiled, according to ancient musical scores and eyewitness accounts, with the help of the cantor of the Riga Choral Synagogue, Zeev Shulman. "Through these ancient melodies we wished to conjure up an image of what it was like in pre-war Latvia, and what it would be like now if the Holocaust had not occurred," says festival organizer Victoria Shaldova. The

melodies themselves are ancient and are sung elsewhere in the world, because Jewish traditions are conservative and nothing much is changed. Only the arrangements have been made more modern.

## Shamir of Latvia

is a Jewish religious community Founded in 1991 by Nathan Barkan, the chief rabbi of Riga and Latvia, supported by the International Shamir Foundation (Israel)

**ACTUAL LEADER:**

Rabbi Menachem Barkahan

**ADDRESS:** Stabu 63, Riga

**ACTIVITIES:** religious, social, educational

**IMPORTANT PROJECTS:**

Jewish Music Festival (September 10 – 14);

*Synagogues of Latvia, 1918 – 1940*;

Latvian Jewish Encyclopaedia

[www.shamir.lv](http://www.shamir.lv)



Model of the Great Choral Synagogue (1871 – 1941), Riga



When asked about his own favourite melodies, Rabbi Barkahan says, "I'm very fond of the song that opens the concert, "Yerushalaim Shel Zahav" ("Golden Jerusalem"). It expresses the Jewish philosophy that Jerusalem is the international centre for the Jewish people, a centre of faith. It is the city of King David." In Israel, the majority of songs are based on psalms, history, and beautiful expressions, which are considered an

inexhaustible source for Jewish music, he explains. "A song is a part of the soul, and a singer expresses his soul when he sings," says the rabbi, adding that the aim of these songs is to create a sense of holiness in people. The rabbi emphasizes that his goal is not to make people fall in love with this music, but rather to show what it was like. Though the synagogues no longer

exist, the melodies still remain – they have been found and renewed. Soon a CD will be available with these songs performed by the men's ensemble Balsis. Some of the melodies will be heard during the concert at the opera house.

Approximately 210 Jewish places of worship and synagogues were in operation in pre-war Latvia. Now only one has remained standing

and preserved its function: the synagogue at Peitavas iela 6/8, in Old Riga. The rest were either destroyed or are now used for other purposes. For example, the offices of the Shamir community are located in the basement of a former synagogue at Stabu iela 63, in central Riga, but the building itself, which was burned down in 1941 and later restored, is now home to a business college.

Rabbi Barkahan believes that strength comes from the past, from roots. "Only by knowing our history, our roots, can we have a present and also a future," he says. "One thing that I always repeat to everyone – I even wrote it in the book – is that the strength of a country or people, regardless of their size, depends on how they look at their past. If they can look at their past with open eyes, then they can live in the present and have a chance at a future. In order for us to have a good future, we must know our past."

Shamir has also begun an extensive encyclopaedia that compiles information about noteworthy Jews with a connection to Latvia. The encyclopaedia encompasses a period of more than four hundred years – the estimated time period of the Jewish presence in Latvian

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territory. The work also includes figures that have achieved international renown. Among the many scientists, researchers, and social activists we also find, for example, the life story of the inventor of Levis blue jeans, Jacob Davis (real name Jacob Youphes), who was born in Rīga in 1831 and immigrated to the U.S. when he was twenty-two; as well as the contemporary Canadian writer and filmmaker David Bezmozgis, who was born in Riga in 1973

Rabbi Barkahan is proud of another achievement. Shamir has purchased two groves of trees in the holy mountains of Jerusalem; one grove commemorates the Jews and the other memorializes those Latvian children of all nationalities – Jews, Latvians, Romas, and Belarusians alike – who died during World War Two. Each tree in the groves honours a child who could still be alive right now if it weren't for the war. In addition, a database with these

Daugavpils is a very interesting place for Jews; it is the site of the graves of two noteworthy rabbis, Josifs Rozins [Joseph Rosen] and Meirs Simha Kacs–Kagans [Meyer Simcha Katz-Kagan].”

An encyclopaedia compiling the life stories of noteworthy Latvian Jews, the publication of educational books, the planting of trees in a holy grove in Jerusalem to commemorate deceased relatives, a map indicating Jewish memorial spots, a recording of music performed in Latvian synagogues and a Jewish music festival – these are just a few of the many projects that have been undertaken by the Shamir Latvian Jewish community.

“I'm not a historian, a musician, or an artist. My job is to organize things,” says Rabbi Menachem, smiling from within his beard. “Our task is not to renew or to continue this culture – we're not specialists in it. This musical project is part of the preservation of our historical memory, an endeavour that also encompasses the publication of books in several languages. It's not important who reads them, but it's important that they exist.” [b6](#)

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and immigrated to Toronto with his family when he was nine. The last encyclopaedia to describe the life of Jews living in Latvian territory was published about 150 years ago, in Russian. The new encyclopaedia will be published in Latvian, Russian, and English. Approximately one thousand articles have been prepared for editing, comprising more than 800 pages of printed text.

children's name is being created, and will soon be available on the Internet.

A Latvian map published by Shamir in Russian, English, and German makes it easy to find Jewish memorial sights throughout the country. “There used to be 61 Jewish communities in Latvia,” explains Rabbi Barkahan. “Now there are three main places you should visit: Rīga, Liepāja, and Daugavpils.