



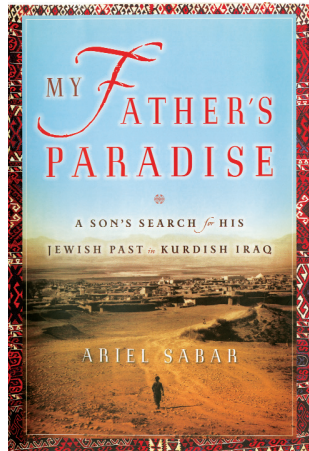
## Strangers in Strange Lands

Passover treats include a son's memoir of the last Jews of Kurdistan...an English translation of the original "Golem" stories.... by **Bonny V. Fetterman**

### My Father's Paradise: A Son's Search for His Jewish Past in Kurdish Iraq by Ariel Sabar

(Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 325 pp., \$25.95)

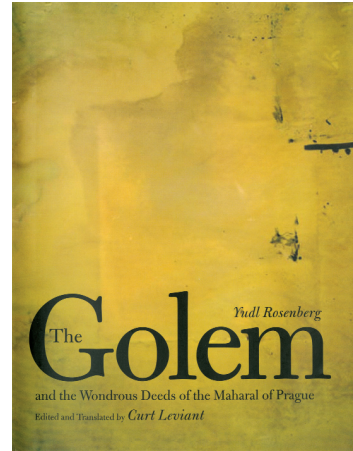
**A**riel Sabar writes that his father, Yona, was the last bar mitzvah in Zakho—a dusty town of Kurds and Jews in northern Iraq—before the family left for Israel in 1951. Yona's own father, Rachamim Beh Sabagha, had arranged for the bar mitzvah a year before Yona's thirteenth birthday—doubting that the extended family would be together again, or somehow knowing this departure would be the end of Yona's childhood. The Kurdish Jews—numbering 1,500 in a town of 27,000—had always gotten along well with their Muslim neighbors, but the rise of Arab nationalism during World War II and Iraq's involvement in the war against Israel made the life of Jews untenable, even in this tiny mountain community.



Their neighbors cried when they left, and Yona would always remember Zakho as his childhood paradise.

Soon the trials of immigrant life in Israel—especially for Jews from Arab lands and most especially for Kurdish Jews—demoralized the elder Sabaghas, but Yona (who changed the family name to Sabar) flourished at The Hebrew University and discovered his lifelong passion: the recovery of his parents' language. One of the first Kurds to graduate from college in Israel, Yona went on to earn his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages at Yale. As a native speaker of Aramaic—the language of the ancient Israelites dating back to the First Temple period—he virtually created the linguistic field of neo-Aramaic as a scholar at U.C.L.A., wrote its only dictionary, and rescued its folklore.

Yet despite Yona's accomplishments and popularity as a professor, his son Ariel writes that as a teenager growing up in Los Angeles he felt embarrassed by his father's foreign ways, his accent, his extreme frugality, his plaid suits and strange haircuts. Only in adulthood, with the birth of his own son, did he realize the importance of having a vital connection to the



family's past.

In undertaking this memoir and history of the Jews of Kurdistan—culminating in a trip back to Zakho with his father in 2005—Ariel Sabar recon-

nects with and transmits this legacy.

### The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague by Yudd Rosenberg, translated from the Hebrew by Curt Leviant

(Yale University Press, 221 pp., paperback \$18)

**T**he "golem"—an "artificial man" or "creature of clay"—has roots going back to the Talmud and the folklore of the Middle Ages. But as Curt Leviant points out, the golem we think of today—the being of superior strength created for the purpose of defending the Jews in dangerous times—only emerged with the 1909 publication of original golem stories by a Warsaw rabbi named Yudd Rosenberg.

Rosenberg's golem is a gentle giant with an endearing name (Yossele) who understands but cannot speak and lives in the courtyard of his creator, Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague (also known as the Maharal). He diligently follows his master's instructions, which often involve detective work and comman-

*continued on page 17*

Bonny V. Fetterman is literary editor of Reform Judaism magazine.

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