Opher Weds Sarah
Invite to a Bene Israel simcha
My Two Diasporas
On being Jewish and Chinese
Asian Jewish Life is a celebration of the diversity of the Jewish experience in Asia as well as of Asian Jewry.

We publish a quarterly print magazine that is also available online that seeks to:

• Connect the separate pockets of Jewish life throughout the region by creating a contemporary creative outlet to share thoughts, ideas and promote unity through memoirs, poetry, short fiction, historical pieces, book and film reviews, viewpoint articles, artist profiles, photography and graphic art.
• Help preserve the long history that Jewish life has imprinted on the region.
• Break down common stereotypes about where Jews hail from or what we look like.
• Build bridges with local communities by sharing our celebration of Jewish life in the region with the aim of leading to a broader understanding of the richness of the Jewish tradition and culture.
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We’ve Moved!

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Teddy Kaufman, the Chairman of the Association of Former Residents of China (Igud Yotzei Sin), a position he served in for over fifty years, passed away on July 15, 2012. Kaufman was born in Harbin, China in 1924 and lived there until 1949 when he made aliyah.

In addition to chairing and co-founding Igud Yotzei Sin (IYS), he was the founder and President of the Israel-China Friendship Association. There are few individuals that have done as much to so meaningfully preserve the important history of the Jews in China. In Kaufman’s own words, “the history continues to be written to the present day.” The IYS Bulletin is Kaufman’s legacy and he was in the final stages of preparing for the Rosh Hashanah issue. His passing has been called “the end of an era”.

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Dear Readers:

Shana tova umetukah and welcome to the 10th issue of Asian Jewish Life.

This issue has a large focus on personal journeys and discovery and touches on Israel, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh, India, China and Uzbekistan. We have received a number of reader requests for articles on the Uzbekistan region, or rather Central Asia generally, and in this issue we present an interview of Maria Tumarkin by Susan Blumberg-Kason. The article, Our Intimate Relationship with Places, discusses Tumarkin’s recent visit to China as well as her family’s history in Uzbekistan. Susan Blumberg-Kason also has included her quarterly book reviews, this time focusing on the Jews of Harbin.

Another first for us is a look at Jewish Bangladesh in The Unknown Jews of Bangladesh – Fragments of an Elusive Community by Dr. Shalva Weil. And from Cambodia, another country that would not necessarily associate with Jews, we present a look at Ben Justus and his organization EGBOK that helps underprivileged young people enter into careers in the hospitality industry. Justus’ Journey from California to Cambodia is our Best of Asian Jewish Life feature this month.

We also speak with Ela Thier, writer, director and producer of the film Foreign, in an interview titled A Story of Friendship and the Ties that Bind Us. The film beautifully portrays the deep bonds of friendship between an Israeli immigrant to the United States and a Vietnamese refugee and is in English, Hebrew and Vietnamese with English subtitles. It is a much larger story though that speaks to friendship, shame, family, poverty, acceptance and identity.

Also speaking on identity, we bring you a reflective piece by So-Han Fan titled My Two Diasporas- On Being Jewish and Chinese. Fan discussed his recent exploration of and acceptance of his own multi-cultural background.

And while Fan journeys to China for the first time, Ellis Jacob, author of The Shanghai I Knew, returns to his childhood home. Jacob’s wife, Helen Lippman, has contributed an article entitled Discovering/ Rediscovering Shanghai- An Insider’s Tour of Shanghai Today.

Also out of China, Tiberiu Weisz, author of The Covenant and the Mandate of Heaven: An In-Depth Comparative Cultural Study of Judaism and China, contributed the article Is Judaism the Yang to China’s Yin- Exploring the Meeting of Two Ancient Cultures. This is the first in a series of articles by Weisz for Asian Jewish Life.

Next, moving onto India, we have the cover photo and accompanying photo spread, Opher Weds Sarah- Invite to a Bene Israel Simcha. Here we present beautiful photography by Yoraa Rafael Reuben a glimpse of a traditional Bene Israel wedding in Thane, India. If you have never been to a Bene Israel wedding or have never been to India the beauty of these photographs could just change that.

Also from the Bene Israel tradition, as promised in our last issue, we have included Nissim Moses’ piece, The History of Malidah - Roots and Meaning of a Bene Israel Service.

Also out of India, we have Miriam Wasser writing about her trip to India to volunteer with MASA’s program LIFE (Leadership International Fellowship Experience). Miriam’s reflective piece is titled Barefoot and Jewish in Tirupati.

Last but not least, Alvite Ningthoujam has written Shabbat with the Bnei Menashe- Meeting My Countrymen in Israel. Alvite Ningthoujam, a non-Jewish Indian, spent 8 months in Israel as a Fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. While in Israel he had the opportunity to get to know a Bnei Menashe family, originally from his home state, who had made aliyah.

Please follow us on Twitter and Facebook (@AsianJewishLife) for a daily dose of news on Jewish life in Asia, Asian Jewry and Israel-Far East relations.

Have a happy and sweet new year.

Erica Lyons
Editor-in-Chief
Diaspora. A fine word, a Greek word, full of grandeur and romance. It sounds desperate and aspirational. “I am the product of... diaspora.” In my particular case, two diasporas: Jewish and Chinese. My father, a Chinese immigrant, met my mother, the descendant of Ashkenazi Jews, in the United States, a place that neither was native to but, that both had been dispersed to, by various historical forces, both political and economic.

Growing up I had limited contact with both cultures, learned languages of neither, and, in a rather peculiar turn of events, was unaware that I had Jewish heritage at all until the age of 21. How and why this part of my ancestry was hidden from me is an entire story unto itself, one that I’m not entirely clear on. For the purposes of this tale, what is relevant is that my mother is descended from Galizian Jews, but I spent most of my life thinking that she was a curious blend of Cajun, Welsh, Irish, and German.

After I found out the truth, I considered my Jewish roots a curious foible of family history, but didn’t quite understand that this particular foible makes me a Jew. It took me some time to come to the realization that I was now part of some sort of ancient, global, proto-tribal brotherhood that accepts me as one of their own unconditionally – I didn’t have to convert or pray or even believe in God. No matter what I do, I am and
always will be a Jew in the eyes of the Jewish people – because it’s my mother who is a Jew. That’s the catch - apparently it’s kind of an all-or-nothing situation.

Some people will tilt their heads and squint and tell me they can see the Jew in me – usually in profile – but it’s not what people think when they first see me. They mostly only see someone Chinese. I remember being teased for being Chinese, but at least I was always accepted as Chinese by Chinese people because of the Chinese surname I inherit from my father. This makes me “Chinese” in a way that a half-Chinese person with a foreign surname is not.

I was interested in my Chinese heritage from a young age but never had any friends who were Chinese or even Asian. I was interested in kung fu and Chinese art and Taoism, but I didn’t learn the language growing up and, besides eating a lot of Chinese food, I didn’t have a very traditional Chinese upbringing.

The Middle Kingdom

In 2009 I received my economic stimulus money and two tax returns at the same time, amounting to about $1100. I used the money to buy a one-way ticket to China and 8 months later, armed with half a Rosetta Stone’s worth of Mandarin, moved to Chengdu, hometown of the Giant Panda and capital of Sichuan province. I lived there for two and a half years, learned to speak Chinese, and did research for an environmental NGO among a slew of other odd jobs. I visited my relatives in Hong Kong and traveled all over the Southwest. As intended, I learned lots of neat things about China and my heritage along the way. I learned that most Chinese people don’t actually eat dog but that donkey is incredibly delicious. I learned that you can make a lot of money in China if you’re foreign, even if you have no talent, provided you also have no self-respect. I learned that I, as the oldest male child in the family, am to inherit a book of names of all the family patriarchs going back through history for dozens of generations.

Hebreween

Less predictably, it was also in China that I became interested in Judaism. This is another story for another time, but suffice to say that it involved my much more, shall we say, Jewy cousin visiting and taking me to a Purim party held at the local Chabad house. I went dressed as Communist Mario - all I knew about the holiday is that it is kind of like Jewish Halloween. We read the Megillah Esther and ate hamantaschen; I shared my unusual story, everyone found it very interesting indeed, and then we all drank- heavily.

Without getting too bogged down in the details of my past, it is important to note that I was raised Christian, in Texas. I rejected that religion when I was 16, long before I knew I was a Jew, and ever since I have had a deep suspicion of anything I perceive as proselytizing. If someone comes up to me and starts telling me about the “good news,” it had better not be something that happened 2,000 years ago.

So Purim was a nice, gentle introduction to Judaism for me because it first and foremost satisfied my “animal soul” with the three C’s – Costumes, cookies, and the consumption of alcohol. I became fast friends with the young rabbi, Dovi, and his wife Sarale, who had just moved to Chengdu a week or two prior. He was the first person to drive home to me the idea that I AM a Jew, completely a Jew, without having to do anything religious. It was a fact before I even had the knowledge of it. Had he been preachy or tried to immediately draw me into an observant Jewish lifestyle, I probably would not have gone back. But he didn’t; he was more interested in drinking and dancing and singing songs, which are all things I can get behind.

The Accident of Birth

I went back to the Chabad house every day that week, not out of a newfound sense of religious zeal but because I wanted to hang out with my friend Dovi. We drank and smoked cigarettes. I talked to him about my life and he talked to me about his, which, because he is a rabbi who was raised in a Hasidic household, ended up being mostly about Judaism. He never tried to tell me what I “should” do as a Jew, but rather made me aware of what he “should” do as a Jew and also reinforced to me that that world, his world, is fully accessible to me, should I choose to embrace it, simply because of the accident of birth. Having lived my whole life in a world of halves – half Chinese, half American, never having a distinct cultural identity or peer network – it was nice to be fully included in something.
Over the next few weeks I spent a lot of time at the Chabad house. I learned a little bit of Hebrew, learned to say Shema Israel, learned to lay tefillin, and even got Bar Mitzvah’ed (nearly 30 and a man at last!).

A few months later, I was in Israel.

The Land

My decision to travel to the Holy Land had little to do with my nascent Jewish identity and more to do with my innate love of travel, and my desire to visit my family. I say little, but not nothing – as much as 5% of my motivation had to do with being a Jew who had never been to Israel. I felt like I had given a fair shake to discovering my Chinese roots and that I owed my Jewish half at least a few weeks on my way back to America. My long-held fondness for Israeli women may have also played a small role. Mostly, however, I wanted to visit my relatives, most of whom I had never met or even heard of, and one of whom is an octogenarian Holocaust survivor.

My time in Israel was brief – two and a half weeks to my two and a half years in the Middle Kingdom – but what it lacked in duration it made up for in intensity. I spent the entire time traveling with my young cousin Eli, who speaks Hebrew and spent his high school years in Israel. We visited his friends and our mutual relatives all over the country, beginning in the West Bank and backpacking to Jerusalem, Haifa, Tzfat, and everywhere in between. We spent a lot of time hitch-hiking, sleeping on sofas, floors, and occasionally outside. We spent two nights in the empty dormitory of a Yeshiva. I met relatives who were frum and relatives who were settlers in the West Bank and those that were human rights lawyers providing pro bono counsel for Palestinians – first cousins from the same branch of the family. We went hiking in the Golan, mikveh’ed in every body of water we could find, and attended a Hasidic wedding in Bnei Brak. We went to the only mixed supermarket in the West Bank, where groups of curious Palestinians shopped side by side with settlers in a modern American-style grocery with air conditioning and frozen dinners. Over the course of my visit, I acquired a kippah, tzitzit, a siddur, and was given a beautiful set of tefillin by my rabbi at his brother’s wedding, which my visit just happened to coincide with.

I can’t say I’ve seen all of Israel, but I’ve seen a lot of different sides of Israel, and as many different expressions of Judaism. Understanding my diasporic roots is a journey that I am still on, both literally and figuratively. At the moment I’m in New York – I’m writing this article in a McDonald’s, huddled away on the second floor with my luggage. I am literally across the street from the Empire State Building. New York is a beautiful city and the whole world is here, including both my ancient, inscrutable diasporas. On this leg of the trip I have stayed in Crown Heights, just down the street from 770, and visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s tomb. I’ve spent as much time at tea shops and temples in Chinatown as I have at shul, I’ve eaten fried chow fun and I’ve eaten chopped liver and pastrami on rye. Rather than having one foot in either culture, I have both feet in both, and at the same time I’m completely an American. In that sense, I have six feet, like an insect. And as I continue to crawl the surface of this earth I learn more about what it means to be all of the above. The main thing that I know now, that I didn’t know before, is that Jewishness and Chineseness aren’t things that you can go and simply pick up and put on, like a hat – you have to create them, and it’s a process that never ends. ♣

Special thanks to my cousin Nathana and my rabbi Dovi Henig of Chabad Chengdu, without both of whom this story wouldn’t exist, and Mazal Tov to Dovi and Sarale who have just been blessed with their first child, a daughter.
I can barely walk nowadays in the streets of Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing or even Kaifeng without meeting another Jew or an Israeli. Jews have “invaded” the Middle Kingdom, followed by the Israelis who found that China is one of the few countries that still welcomes Jews, or at least, they do not perceive the Chinese to be anti-Semitic or prejudiced. Back home, when I open a Jewish paper, I increasingly find more articles of the adventure of an Israeli, another Jew or a story of a Chabadnic in the land of the Middle Kingdom. The common theme is that the Chinese think the Jews are rich, smart and good at business. One blogger, however, pointed out that this attitude comes more from misinformation, lack of knowledge and ignorance, which historically has turned into an anti Jewish attitude and ultimately anti-Semitism.

There is some truth in the blogger’s observation. While reading the Chinese language media, I can hardly say that they publish entirely positive articles about the Jews or Israel. While it is true that the English language media praises the Jews and writes what (foreign) readers want to hear, the coverage in the local media is a different story. The Chinese use the same phrases but with negative connotation.

The general Chinese press often portrays the Jews as agents of the corrupt Western system, and Israel as a puppet of the United States. More troubling to me personally is that articles published in the Chinese academic media often contain a paragraph or two inserted clearly by someone other than the original writer. These “additions” are not flattering to the Jews nor to Judaism, they rather leave a bitter taste in the readers’ mouth.

As a Jew, I can relate to these controversial writings. Jews, on the one hand, are used to airing sharply different opinions and having heated debates. Such arguments have defined Judaism since the time of the sages in early Talmudic period. On the other hand, as a scholar of China of over 35 years, I know that contradiction, especially between the old and the new, shapes the Chinese attitude towards the rest of the world. Traditionally, the Chinese believe that opposing forces of positive and negative work in tandem to create a balance, or as the Chinese say nothing happens without the interaction of yin and yang. Such interaction (between yin and yang) has also created a Chinese culture that practices Confucian ethics. Within
those ethical standards changes occur due to conflicts, contradictions, and opposites. Accordingly, Chinese culture is the yin part of the cultural equation, yet there must be another culture equal in endurance, sustainability and depth to complement the equation. Is Judaism the yang to China’s yin?

Meeting in Biblical Times

One of the most basic and fascinating questions is, was there any connection between Judaism and China in biblical times?

Both Jews and Chinese scholars have tried to answer this question, with each side emphasizing their point of view. Jewish scholars relied on the Judaic sources, while the Chinese drew inspiration from Chinese sources. Evidently, these studies were too lopsided, either too partial to Judaism or China. What is lacking is a study that weights both sources equally. That would require a facilitator well versed in both languages and cultures, and equally important, to be able to elucidate the events in dual historical context. With my background in both Judaism (raised in the orthodox tradition), and a professor of Classical Chinese, I took it upon myself to try to answer this question. I must admit, that at times I had my own reservations. Thanks to one of my colleagues who encouraged me to embark on this study, and to my wife who was with me all these years that I spent on this research.

Knowledge of the Other

Secondly, did the Israelites know about China and vice versa China about the Israelites in biblical times? First, let’s look at this question from a Jewish point of view. The most common and simple answer would be that the Prophet Isaiah (8th century BCE) was the first to mention China: “Behold, these shall come from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim” (49:12). Since Biblical scholars could not find additional biblical reference to China, they placed the land of Sinim somewhere in central Turkey of today. Others translated Sinim as “from the East”. Unsatisfactory as they were, these explanations were accepted. I must admit that I was uneasy about these interpretations (especially the latter one) but due to lack of a better alternative, I put the issue to rest.

What changed my mind was that I came across a Chinese text that located the place where the Chinese military brought the finest warhorses. So you could ask: What is the connection between horses and Judaism? The answer is simple, both the Chinese and King Solomon (10th century BCE) bought the finest warhorses in the small kingdom of Ferghana, (Northern Afghanistan today) at a place called Kucha. The people of Ferghana were the prime breeders of warhorses and they brought their horses to Kucha, the marketplace for “heavenly horses” in ancient times to sell them to traders from far away places.

Initially Kucha was a small post off the main Silk Road but due to the horse trade it gradually became a geographic crossroad of the Silk Route. The finest warhorses of Kucha were in great demand and when King Solomon received fine horses as gifts from visiting foreigners (I Kings 10:24; 2 Chr. 9:28) he was so fond of them (I Kings 4:26) that he dispatched traders to Kveh (Kua) where the horses came with a high price (I Kings 10:28).

Linguistics

Where was Kveh/Kua (Hebrew letters of Qof, Vav, Hey)? Was it in Central Anatolia (Turkey) as most Biblical scholars believed or was it the Hebrew name of Kucha? Incidentally, both biblical literature and Chinese literature refer to the same market place bearing the same name. I attribute the different pronunciation to the difference between Chinese and Hebrew languages. Linguistically, Kucha and Kveh/Kua contain the same syllables peculiar to their own language.

Considering the myriad of traders, travelers, adventurers, monks and others of different background, speaking different dialects, communicating in any way they could to make themselves understood, the Chinese word of Kucha could have been easily been heard and transliterated as Kveh/Kua in Hebrew. Kucha or Kveh/Kua was the place where Chinese horse buyers and traders from the Israelite Kingdom of Solomon had probably come in the earliest contact. Gradually it became a very important trading post where people of every creed, traders, pilgrims, adventurers and monks met and exchanged goods and stories. By the second century CE, Kucha had a population of 150,000 people, and three centuries later its population doubled.

In essence Chinese annals had solved a biblical mystery! The Chinese records complemented the biblical information, and in addition, provided us a timeframe of when and where the Israelites could have come in contact with the Chinese. Based on this information, the Israelites could have heard about the land of China some two hundred years before the Prophet Isaiah mentioned “the land of Sinim”.

Tiberiu Weisz, is author of The Covenant and the Mandate of Heaven: An In-depth Comparative Cultural Study of Judaism and China. This is the first in a series of articles he will write for Asian Jewish Life all drawn from his research for The Covenant and the Mandate of Heaven, which includes a much more comprehensive look at these topics. Next issue will feature an exploration of the biblical influence in the Chinese classics.
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Our Intimate Relationship with Places

Interview with Maria Tumarkin
Author and historian Maria Tumarkin was born in the former Soviet Union and has made Australia her home since she emigrated in 1989. Her books include Traumascapes (Melbourne University Press, 2005), Courage (Melbourne University Press, 2007), and Otherland (Random House, 2011), the last of which is a memoir of her return to Russia and Ukraine with her pre-teen daughter, Billie. Asian Jewish Life recently sat down with Tumarkin to discuss her first trip to China, her Jewish identity, and her family’s connection to Central Asia.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): You traveled to China earlier this year for the Shanghai Literary Festival and Australian Writers’ Week in Beijing. How did this come about?

Maria Tumarkin (MT): I came as part of the annual Australian Writers’ Week. Each year a group of Australian writers are invited by the Australian Embassy to come to China. I was lucky to be part of the group this year and thrilled to discover that Australia’s new Ambassador to China, Frances Adamson (I think I should be saying Her Excellency at this point) is a voracious reader.

AJL: Can you discuss your first impressions of China?

MT: This was my first time in China so the whole trip felt pretty eye-opening. Certain things instantly made sense to me, because I grew up in the former USSR and so have a non-Western DNA. Things like pollution, for instance, or the tireless sloganeering of the official media, or the complex dance of what you can and cannot say were familiar. And, of course, as were the very excellent, very serious questions asked by students at Chinese universities we spoke at – yet another reminder of the vast respect afforded to education. But, of course, other things were totally new to me — state capitalism, for one, or how a country such as China deals with the anarchic, borderless world of internet and social media. And inevitably, of course, just the sheer the size of it all.

AJL: What did you think of the literary scene in Shanghai and Beijing?

MT: It felt vibrant, alive. The festivals I attended had brilliant line-ups and really engaged audiences. But I only caught the ex-pat side of things, so have a very limited view.

AJL: During World War II, Shanghai was home to both Russians and Jews. Were you able to tour the old Jewish Ghetto while you were there?

MT: Yes, I was very fortunate to be taken to the site of the old Jewish Ghetto by the Shanghai-based historian Tess Johnston. Tess knew the story of every corner on every building. She took my breath away. Visiting the site of the ghetto was probably one ‘must’ I had in my head for this trip.

AJL: Besides Shanghai and Beijing, did you have the opportunity to see other places in China?

MT: I traveled to Hefei with another Australian author Janette Turner Hospital, who just happens to be one of my favorite Australian writers. In Hefei, we spoke to students and staff at the Anhui University and I must say that for both Janette and myself that talk – we didn’t want it to end – was one of the genuine highlights of our trip. Sometimes things just come together and feel right for everyone.

AJL: In Otherland, you write with a strong Jewish identity. Unlike many Soviet Jews, your parents never shied away from their Jewish identity. You were clearly identified as Jews in your passports and school rosters. After you moved to Australia as a teenager, have you and your family assimilated into mainstream Aussie society, or have you embraced the freedom to practice religion and become more observant, even if it’s in a secular/cultural way?

MT: We were godless Jews in the former USSR and we remain godless Jews in Australia. Amongst my parents’ many virtues is their great distaste for hypocrisy. So, on their arrival to Australia, my parents said: “If religion mattered to us, we should have practiced back in the Soviet Union when our lives were on the line.” We didn’t practice then and we don’t practice now. Our Jewish identity – and it is undoubtedly Jewish – is cosmopolitan and secular.

AJL: You write in your memoir about your visits back to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Karkov, among others. But you also tell the fascinating story of your grandmother’s escape to Uzbekistan during World War II and how your mother was born there.

MT: My grandmother Faina learned about Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 in the Ukrainian village of Dubovyzovka, where she was holidaying with her three-year old...
daughter Lina (my beloved auntie). At the time of the invasion Faina was pregnant with my mum. I should explain here too that my grandmother happened to be in Dubovyyazovka because her sister Tamara, who was a young doctor, was sent there for work. Tamara and Faina couldn’t go back to Kiev because their city was being bombed, and so they had to join the massive exodus of war refugees across the European part of the Soviet Union, many of whom made their way to the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Tamara was actually assigned to Uzbekistan as a doctor and so they found themselves at the Station Malyutinskaya, a tiny kishlak (Turkish for ‘winter hut’ or ‘wintering place’) deep in Uzbekistan, where the residents had never seen a doctor and where official medicine of the kind my great-aunt practiced was as alien as they came. The Asian parts of the Soviet Union were, on the whole, not directly touched by the war. This is where my mother was born. I should say that my grandmother pleaded with her sister to help her terminate the pregnancy, because carrying a child at such a time seemed like an act of pure insanity. And Tamara, of course, was a determined pragmatist and besides, she had no objections in principle to abortion. Yet she refused. ‘No, this child will bring light’, she said, and that was that. When Tamara delivered my mother at Station Malyutinskaya, a tiny kishlak deep in Uzbekistan, the baby was named Svetlana; svet means ‘light’ in Russian.

**AJL:** Have you traveled to Uzbekistan? Does your family feel special ties to Uzbekistan because, as you mention in your book, it offered refuge to your grandmother, thus saving her from the massacre at Babi Yar?

**MT:** I don’t know about special ties, but certainly for my mum and my auntie, Uzbekistan is not just any place. When a great Russian writer, Dina Rubina, who was born in Uzbekistan just like my mum, wrote a book set there called *On the Sunny Side of the Street*, my mum loved it and read it in a state of heightened recognition. We haven’t been back though.

**AJL:** The trip you write about in *Otherland* wasn’t the first time you’d returned to Russia and Ukraine since you left as a teenager. When was your first visit back? Was there a startling difference between that year and when you moved away in 1989?

**MT:** I first came back to Russia in 1999, when Billie was two and a half. We didn’t go to the Ukraine on that trip. I was too scared of having an intensely emotional response to my city and to my childhood friends. So I stayed away. Now I wish I didn’t. The late 1990s in Russia felt pretty hopeful to me despite all the hardships. It was still the pre-Putin era, the very end of it, and my friends there, and their friends, were writing, reporting, directing, staging plays, playing music with a sense of urgency and compulsion I envied madly. Many people still do, but over a decade of Putinism has taken its toll – assassination of journalists, incarceration of oligarchs, brutal suppression of dissenting voices and so forth.

**AJL:** In *Otherland*, you travel with your preteen daughter, Billie, in order to show her where you and your family came from. From Billie’s diary entries in *Otherland*, she’s quite an accomplished writer herself. Do you hope she’ll follow in your footsteps?

**MT:** Billie, who is fifteen now, writes quite a lot and she definitely has things to say. But she also sings, draws, debates and does drama. She is an arty type. I like that. I like passing on books that I just finished reading. I like going to see the same films and exhibitions. I like the camaraderie we have developed. The rivers of our conversations never run dry. We’re never bored with each other. As to whether she becomes a writer or not, I don’t care either way. Let the child be, I say.

**AJL:** Now that you’ve been to China, do you have plans to return? Which cities would you like too see?

**MT:** I’d love to return. Most definitely. I am interested in people as well as in places. Philosopher Edward Casey in his book *Getting Back into Place* has put forward a really interesting argument that neither people nor places should be thought of as entirely independent entities. Instead, he suggests, we imagine a far more complex unity, let’s call it ‘persons-in-places’. For Casey, and I would have to agree with him, our relationship with places is that fundamental and that powerful. Places we inhabit are not backdrops to our activities, we are marked by them and we are transformed by them in all kinds of invisible, and sometimes insidious, ways. So I’d love to have that sense of people’s lives enmeshed in their native and adopted country. That would be the best way to travel.
Shortly after arriving in Shanghai for his high school reunion, my husband, Ellis Jacob—an Iraqi Jew and native Shanghailander—was walking along the Bund when a stranger grabbed his arm. “Ellis, come talk to my people,” implored Dvir Bar-Gal, an Israeli photojournalist who conducts tours tracing the history of Jews in Shanghai. His “people” were the dozen or so men and women taking his tour.

The story Bar-Gal tells began with Baghdadi Jews like Ellis’s forebears, the first of whom settled in Shanghai in the mid-1800s. In a book titled, The Shanghai I Knew, Ellis details his family’s migration from Baghdad (and Basra on his mother’s side) to Shanghai by way of Bombay and Calcutta, and his early life as “a foreign native in prerevolutionary China.” Bar-Gal has Ellis’s book and had recognized him from the picture on the back cover.

The next morning—my first day in Shanghai—Ellis and I took Bar-Gal’s tour. In our group were an Australian couple who’d arrived in the city ahead of their scheduled trip to be sure they didn’t miss it, several New Zealanders and Americans, and a young Chinese woman whose Jewish boyfriend had piqued her interest.

As we gathered around Bar-Gal to hear about Shanghai’s first Jewish settlers, I had a powerful sense of déjà vu. Although I’d never before been in China, I was familiar with the names of Shanghai’s most prominent Sephardic families: the Abrahams, Hardoons, Kadoories, and the Sassoons. All these families are not just names to us; they make an appearance not only in Ellis’s book, but frequently in his conversation as well. All were attracted by the opportunity for commerce Shanghai offered after the British won the Opium Wars and opened it to international trade.

With the still-bustling Huangpu River as a backdrop, evidence of the Baghdadi Jews—and the wealth they amassed—is all around. The still stately, if slightly shabby, Astor House Hotel, on a corner where Suzhou Creek and the Huangpu River converge, was the headquarters for Ellis’s reunion. Owned by Kadoorie until the Communists took the city, the hotel’s lobby is filled with pictures of famous guests, from US President Ulysses S. Grant to Charlie Chaplin, the Duke of Edinburgh and Albert Einstein.

A block away is the former Broadway Mansions, an upscale residential building in the 1930s and ’40s, now a 5-star hotel. In the opposite direction is Nanjing Road, much of it developed...
by Silas Hardoon. Hardoon rose from poverty, working in a mailroom, as a doorman, and as a rent collector, according to Bar-Gal, before becoming the richest man in the Far East.

Later that day, Ellis and I walked a mile or so up Nanjing Road—through a crowded, noisy shopping area where neon lights, flashing signs and stores selling the latest electronic devices assault your senses. Nanjing Road in Hardoon’s day was equally crowded, Ellis recalls. There were big department stores then, as now, and lots of little eateries, take-out stalls and small markets—but without the buzz and bright lights.

When Ellis lived here in the 1930s and ‘40s, Nanjing Road became Bubbling Well Road as you headed west, and his home—on the second floor of an apartment building—was on Seymour Road, just off Bubbling Well Road. The building looks different now; a verandah that was accessible from the Jacobs’ second-floor apartment has been closed off. Its history lives on nonetheless, with a plaque on an outer wall identifying the complex as the “former Cosmopolitan Apartments.”

Back down Nanjing Road along the Bund is the legendary Peace Hotel—built in the late 1920s by Victor Sassoon. Sir Victor, a British baron as well as an Iraqi Jew, lived in a wood-paneled penthouse apartment atop the green-domed art deco building.

The splendor can still be seen. The night before, shortly after I arrived, jet-lagged from a 14-hour flight, Ellis and I sat, with some of his former classmates, inside Sassoon’s old apartment. We listened to a presentation about today’s Shanghai American School, a modern iteration of the high school from which he graduated. After the talk we had cocktails on the roof—with a spectacular view of the older, elegant buildings along the Bund and the newer, sleeker architecture across the river in Pudong.

Victor was the grandson of David Sassoon, who hired Ellis’s grandfather, Jacob Shalom Jacob, in the 1880s, thereby making it possible for the Jacob clan to escape from an Iraq that was increasingly intolerant of Jews. The elder Jacob’s first job was in Bombay. Around the turn of the century, as Sassoon’s real estate holdings expanded, he was sent to Shanghai to help manage them.

While the Iraqi Jews were amassing their fortunes, a second wave of Jews began arriving, fleeing from pogroms in Russia. The Russian Jews traveled by train across Siberia to China. Many disembarked and settled in Harbin, but a small enclave continued on to Shanghai. As Bar-Gal spoke of Shanghai’s Russian Jewish community, I couldn’t help thinking of my own heritage. My grandparents, too, were driven out of Russia by the pogroms. By fate or fortune, they boarded a ship bound for the United States rather than a train to China.

Refugees fleeing the Nazis comprised the third and final wave of Jews to arrive in Shanghai, starting in the late 1930s. Eventually expanding to about 20,000, refugees from Germany, Austria, and Poland were settled with the help of both the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi communities. Soon, bakeries, cafes, and music venues began to appear in what became known as Little Vienna.

The next group to take Shanghai by storm wasn’t Jewish, but Japanese. They swarmed the city in 1941, the day of Pearl Harbor. Ellis remembers awakening the next morning to find
armed soldiers on every major street corner. But despite their presence, the Japanese left the established Jewish communities alone. Ellis celebrated his Bar Mitzvah in 1944 at the Orthodox Ohel Rachel Synagogue while the city was under Japanese occupation. (He graduated from high school in 1949, just days after the Communists took the city.)

This wasn’t the case for the refugees who had fled the Holocaust for this safe haven. Their experience in Shanghai was dramatically different. In 1943, under pressure from the Nazis, the Japanese ordered all “stateless refugees” (defined as those who arrived after 1937) into a ghetto in Hongkou—the next stop on Bar-Gal’s tour.

I’d known about the ghetto for years and seen the documentary, “Shanghai Ghetto.” Now, Bar-Gal led us down a dark and dreary lane and into a tiny dilapidated apartment occupied by Jewish families some 70 years ago. The refugees, restricted to an area of roughly one square mile, lived in squalor, crowded in among some of Shanghai’s poorest Chinese.

A short distance from the ghetto is the old Ohel Moshe Synagogue, a former spiritual home to the refugees that now commemorates them. The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum includes a restoration of the old synagogue, a bookshop, and dozens of photos, art works, newspaper clippings and a short film about life in the ghetto, as well as some rotating exhibits. The museum also houses a plaque honoring Ho Feng Shan. Ho, a little-known Chinese diplomat serving in Vienna, personally saved thousands of Jews from the Holocaust by issuing documents they needed to leave the country.

In nearby Huoshan Park, through a gate in a quiet, peaceful setting, stands a stone memorial to the refugees. A simple paragraph, written in English, Chinese and Hebrew, tells of how they escaped Nazi persecution and came to Shanghai, then suffered at the hands of the Japanese. Disease was rampant in the ghetto and, Bar-Gal told us, about one in 10 refugees died.

If Bar-Gal has his way, another Jewish memorial will be erected in Shanghai—this one in memory of every Jew who died and was buried here. There were four Jewish cemeteries in Shanghai. All were demolished during the Cultural Revolution. Soon after he arrived in 2001, Bar-Gal heard about two headstones with Hebrew writing sitting in an antique store. His interest was piqued. Gradually, he said, “what started as a journalistic story became a mission.”

In villages outside the city, headstones were tossed into the river. Bar-Gal has used bulldozers to pull them out, seen villagers using headstones as scrub boards and moved the ones he has reclaimed from one site to another. The 100-plus headstones Bar-Gal has found thus far are catalogue (and searchable) online at shanghaijewishmemorial.com.

This piece of Shanghai Jewish history, too, has special meaning for Ellis. Four of his relatives were buried in the city: a maternal grandfather whose name he doesn’t know; his paternal grandfather, Jacob Shalom Isaiah Jacob; and two uncles, Ezekiel Jacob and Saleh Jacob. Perhaps, through Bar-Gal’s efforts, their headstones may be found and their lives—and deaths—memorialized.

Helen Lippman is the managing editor of The Journal of Family Practice in Parsippany, NJ. She has written about outdoor activities, science and technology, and employee benefits, as well as travel and US health care.

Please watch for our review of Ellis Jacob’s memoir, The Shanghai I Knew: A Foreign Native in Pre-Revolutionary China, in an upcoming issue of Asian Jewish Life.
The Unknown Jews of Bangladesh
Fragments of an Elusive Community

It often comes as a surprise that there was once a thriving Jewish community in Pakistan. This is well documented. The real mystery and surprise is the fact that there was also once a Jewish community in East Pakistan, today Bangladesh, of which little is known.

Shalom Cohen (1762-1836) was the founder of the Calcutta Jewish community in West Bengal, which today is a part of India. He had migrated there from Surat (today in another part of India) in 1798. And, he also established the East Bengal Jewish community in what has become Bangladesh today.

He sent his employees to Dacca (today Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh) to trade in cloths, silks and muslins, and he himself sojourned there too. In 1817, Moses Duek, a businessman married to Cohen’s eldest daughter Lunah (at the age of 13!), left Calcutta to live for several years in Dacca and established a prayer hall there. Duek carried out his business in partnership with a non-Jew from Aleppo. In 1822, Duek finally returned to Calcutta with his family from Dacca, but kept up business contacts there. It is significant that, while the Baghdadi Jews continued to trade in Dacca, mainly in textiles, but also in pearls and opium, most of the Jews did not live there but
actually resided in Calcutta, where they established multiple synagogues.

At the time of the Partition of Bengal and India in 1947, when the British pulled out of India, there were some 4,000 Jews in West Bengal, primarily in Calcutta, but, according to reliable sources, there were only about 135 Jews residing in East Bengal in Dacca. The latter became part of East Pakistan, which became part of the new nation of Pakistan, but separated geographically from it by 1,600 kilometers of Indian territory. The famous American Jewish architect Louis Kahn designed the largest parliament building in the world in Dacca; completed in 1974, it was actually Kahn’s last monumental project.

In 1971, the Bangladesh Liberation War took place. Interestingly, it was a Jew, Lieutenant General (retired) JFR Jacob, who liberated East Pakistan during this war. General Jacob, as he is often known, was formerly governor of the Punjab and Goa, but today resides in New Delhi. He was born into a Baghdadi Jewish family in Calcutta, and never hid his Jewish ancestry. On the contrary, when I first reached India in the late 1970’s, Lt. General Jacob was an active member of the well-known New Delhi prayer hall, the Judah Hyam Synagogue, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in January 2007. He reached the highest ranks in India, which traditionally promoted co-existence and lived in harmony with its Indian Jewish minority. In the 1960’s, during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, Lt. General Jacob commanded an infantry division in the Indian state of Rajasthan, which later became India’s twelfth Infantry Division. He became a Major General by 1967. But his finest hour was in 1971 when as Chief of Staff of the Indian Army’s Eastern Command, he defeated Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistani War in two weeks, and successfully liberated East Pakistan. As fighting raged, he flew to Dhaka and wrested an unconditional surrender from Pakistan’s military commander Lt. General A. A. K. Niazi. 90,000 Pakistani soldiers surrendered to the Indian Army. East Pakistan then became the independent state of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is now officially a parliamentary democracy but 90% of the population is Muslim.

The Jews in East Pakistan (before it became Bangladesh) were in no way numerous and kept a very low profile in this Muslim country. Apparently today, a few Jews still remain, but they are quite assimilated. There is no synagogue today in Bangladesh, although a few expatriates do meet up on the eve of the Jewish
New Year and on the Day of Atonement. Getting a portrait of this elusive community requires patience, a few of the right contacts and quite a bit of ‘digging’. A posting on Trip Advisor by a tourist asking where the synagogue is in Dhaka for Yom Kippur received no serious response and a few months later, the blog was closed “due to inactivity”. Another Jewish blogger shared that he went through a full orthodox conversion, is himself of mixed ancestry, his father being Yemenite Jewish and his mother Bangladeshi. Other people have written into the same blog saying they do business with Bangladesh, visit there and a few even reside there. As one person wrote: “The only Jews you will find in Bangladesh are those merchants with extensive business reasons to stay in Bangladesh.”

But liberating military commanders, the monuments of great architects, intrepid travelers and fortune seeking businessmen do not make a community. The question still remains, who are the Jews of Bangladesh? Joseph Edward of Ontario, Canada, explained the history of his family and their unique ties to the region. Joseph’s father Rahamim David Barook and his older brother Ezra Barook, were born in Calcutta, and moved to what was then East Pakistan. They adopted the surname Edward; his brother Ezra was known as Eddy Edward. Rahamim David Edward, Joseph’s father, married a Catholic of Portuguese descent. His uncle married a tribal king’s daughter from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and she gave birth to a son. However, his wife died during childbirth and Joseph Edward’s uncle gave the baby up to a Muslim family for adoption. Edward has been in contact with cousins living in Arad and Beersheba, Israel. Other members of the family live in Sydney, Australia, in the UK and in Toronto, Canada.

Two other families of Jewish descent do in fact still live in Dhaka, but they have converted to Catholicism. Priscilla nee Jacob was married to Alfie D’Costa, who died some years back. Priscilla had her own private school in Dhaka. Her brother Henry also married locally and still resides in Dhaka as a Catholic. Likewise, there were two other Jewish brothers in East Pakistan, whom Joseph Edward knew: Enoch and Zebulon Daniels. Enoch lived in Chittagong and Zebulon lived in Dhaka. Their children now live in Canada and the UK.

While the Jews in West Bengal managed to create a full community, the Jews of East Bengal largely lived there for commercial reasons. They were never numerous. Nevertheless, documentation of the Jews of Asia and specifically Pakistan is incomplete without information on the Jews of East Pakistan, or what is today Bangladesh. The full story of this elusive community remains to be written.
Message from the Chairman of the Israeli Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong

We are dedicated to promoting trade and development between Hong Kong SAR and Israel for mutual benefit.

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c/o The Jewish Community Centre, One Robinson Place,
70 Robinson Road, Mid-Levels, Hong Kong
CoverStory
by Yonatan Rafael Reuben

Opher Weds Sarah
Invite to a Bene Israel simcha
The photos in this spread are taken from the Mehendi, a Bene Israel traditional ceremony, as well as from the wedding ceremony of Opher and Sarah. Both events were held in the Shaar Hashamaim Synagogue (Gate Of Heaven Synagogue) that serves the Bene Israel community of Thane, India, located just outside of Mumbai. Shaar Hashamaim, consecrated in 1879, is steeped in tradition and history. While many of the wedding rituals captured are timeless and found in Jewish weddings worldwide, the photos also offer a glimpse of rituals and traditions unique to the Bene Israel community.

Yoraan Rafael
Tirupati is home to one of South India’s holiest sites, the Sri Venketeswara Temple. This famous temple sits on top of a hill called Tirumala, which is one of seven important peaks in the area, and one of the richest pilgrim centers in the world. Every day, between 50,000-100,000 Hindu pilgrims visit this site to take darshan. To take, or receive darshan is literally to see and connect with something divine, like the image of their deity, or a great spiritual leader or guru. In the case of the Sri Venketeswara Temple, to take darshan is to see the idol of the temple’s presiding deity, Lord Venketeswara, who is believed by followers to be a merciful and benevolent form of the Hindu god, Vishnu. Lord Venketeswara is known as a wish fulfiller, and pilgrims journeying to Tirumala come either to make a wish or to give thanks for one that was granted. He is also known by the names Balaji, Govinda, and Srinivasa—names that you can hear people chanting, yelling, and mumbling everywhere you go in Tirupati.

I was living in India at the time as part of a nine-month MASA program called LIFE (Leadership International Fellowship Experience) that focuses on leadership development and social change. The first half of the program is based in Hyderabad, India, and the second half in Jerusalem, Israel. While on the program, participants do tailor-made, meaningful internships related to social change or justice in each location. While in India, I interned with Aide et Action (an international development organization that works on issues related to education). I spent my days in the field photographing and conducting interviews with the children, mothers, and teachers served by the organization.

Working five days a week left little time to explore India outside of Hyderabad,
so when a travel agent friend of mine named Azeem suggested that I visit the Hindu pilgrimage city of Tirupati, I agreed immediately. (A decision augmented by some internet research.)

I grew up “culturally Jewish,” never having much of a Jewish identity, or feeling very connected to the spiritual or ritualistic side of the religion. But I am fascinated by those who do. I was curious to explore Tirupati not only because it looked beautiful, but also because I was searching for something in my own religious identity.

Azeem had mentioned that there were two ways to get to the temple: one was to walk up the mountain, and the other, which he recommended, was to take a shuttle up to the top. This was a recommendation I heard again and again from people; every time I asked someone how long it takes to walk, the time seemed to get longer and longer. Some people said two hours, while others said at least five—“just take the bus.” Never!

I was up early the next morning, ready for my two-to-five hour hike to see the Sri Venketeswara temple. A man at the front desk of the hostel said that I should tell a rickshaw driver to take me to Alipiri. Upon arrival, I learned that the pilgrim footpath to the Temple itself is called the Alipiri footpath, and is comprised of 3550 steps, spread out over 9 km.

“Where are you going?” my rickshaw driver called out to me. “You can’t wear shoes on the path!” I learned that if I wanted to walk the path, I would have to do it barefoot. With no idea whether I’d be walking over rocks, or through dirt and garbage, I threw my sneakers in my backpack, took out my camera, waved to the rickshaw driver, and entered through the dark tunnel that led to the beginning of the Alipiri footpath.

I exited the short tunnel into the sunlight. In front of me was one of the most gorgeous arrays of activities I have ever seen. At the base of a colorful staircase, a handful of people were marking the start of their pilgrimage with a puja. In Hinduism, a puja is a religious ritual or offering to a god or deity in order to receive their blessing in return. It is usually done at the beginning of a religious ceremony or right before entering a temple, but also often marks the start of a new venture. There are a lot ways an offering can be made, though many involve cracking a coconut, giving flowers, and applying colorful powders and pastes. I snapped a few photos of people cracking coconuts and lighting small fires from kurpuram (a white herb turned into a paste), and then began my ascent up the stairs.

I swooned over each and every step. All of my favorite colors—bright reds, oranges, and turmeric yellows—decorated the backs of the stairs, and covered figurines or other carvings and sculptures along the way. It seemed such a far cry from any Jewish synagogue or custom I was aware of, as it was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I wondered if it was possible to die from a color-induced coma of happiness.

It wasn’t too long before I encountered two young girls touching the back of every step with a colorful paint. Through broken English, I was able to understand that many people who have had a prayer or a wish granted will travel to Tirumala, and will touch each and every one of the 3550 steps with a colorful powdered paint as a sign of gratitude.

Every few hundred feet, the path would pass through a small cluster of chaat, tea, and snack stands, and all along the way, tired pilgrims rested or napped. There were small temples in the forest that surrounded the path, and giant trees decorated with paints, flowers, and fabrics (which I later learned contained offerings or other tokens of thankfulness). A little while later I met two other girls who helped explain what was going on, and who took me under their wings for the remainder of the ascent.
About three-quarters of the way through, the path suddenly ended near a big gathering of people eating a rice dish. The two main acts of a Hindu pilgrimage, my friends explained, are darshan and prasadam. Prasadam is a gift—often a food—that is offered to a god or a deity, then “tasted” by the god, imbued with divine blessing, and then consumed by the pilgrim/devotee. The Laddu prasadam at Tirumala is world famous, and, in fact, is a patented recipe. As we dug into our holy lunch, I tried to think what in my cultural heritage could be akin to all that I saw around me; the Judaism I grew up with seemed very bland in comparison.

Since being a teenager, I have struggled with what Judaism means to me, and those feelings surfaced again as I looked around—where were the flower garlands, the colorful paints, and the coconuts in my religion? I tried to re-center myself as we continued our ascent, reminding myself that sticking with the theme of the pilgrimage, I should concentrate on things I was thankful for throughout the day.

That quickly, however, became a bit more difficult. Up until this point in the day, my feet had been doing quite well. But shortly after the prasadam stop, the path cuts out and the walk continues along the highway for a kilometer or two. The path is mostly smooth stone, which my soft Western feet could handle, but the sandy, pebble-ridden stretch of highway was something else. Of course I could have put my shoes back on, but I had come this far, and was determined to complete the path barefoot. I fell behind my two friends, and like some wounded soldier in a war movie, told them that they could go on without me. But, as my self-appointed guides, they insisted on waiting.

Once we got off of the road, it was about another kilometer until we reached the final steps, where some people were climbing on their hands and knees. Like touching the back of the steps with paint, crawling up the final part of the Alipiri path is another way of showing gratitude to the divine for granting a wish.

At the top step there were piles of powders, flowers, some rupees, and ashes from small fires. The girls gave a small prayer, put a pink tikka (a powdered religious mark) on my forehead, and we continued on to the Tirumala Temple Complex.

The Temple complex is truly a world unto itself. Thousands of people were praying, shopping, chatting with friends, eating, napping, and walking around. I followed my two friends, eventually giving in to my aching and roughed-up feet by putting on my shoes. We parted ways around 2 pm, since they wouldn’t finish preparing and receiving darshan for at least another eight or nine hours, and because of a bizarre hostel policy, I had to be back by 7 pm to reserve my room for another night. I spent the rest of the afternoon exploring and talking with people.
Crammed against the wall of the tightly packed shuttle bus, I watched the sun drop behind the mountains and thought about how I had left Hyderabad for something new, exciting, and beautiful. After soaking in all of the energy, colors, and spirituality of the day, I felt recharged in that magical way only traveling can foment. But I also felt a little jealous of the aesthetics of Hindu traditions; I couldn’t silence that slight nagging feeling that Judaism just wasn’t as beautiful.

Flash forward a week or two. I am sitting in a small hut made from patched tarpaulin and other found objects in India’s second largest trash dump, listening to a woman talk about why she does not want to send her children to school. She needs them, she explains, to help sort through the municipal waste and collect scrap metals and plastics that can be sold to a local buyer. She is telling me that she comes from a long-line of “rag-pickers,” (what they call those who scavenge trash for recyclables) and that no one in her family has gone to school; she just doesn’t see the value in it. I was there interviewing her for my internship with Aide et Action.

If Tirupati was the most beautiful place I saw in India, this place was the worst. This woman and her community lived at the base of a man-made mountain of trash, where piles spontaneously erupt in burning flames, as methane and other gases heat up, mix with oxygen, and ignite. My eyes stung the whole day, and I could taste the smell of burning plastic, decaying vegetables, milk, soggy paper, and rotting meat. The sound of flies buzzing was the white noise behind the white smog. I stepped over tires, rags, soda cans, coconut shells, napkins, and decomposing mush on a tour of the mountain. Other details of the visit are too horrible to recount here, and I returned home that evening shocked and depressed about what I had just experienced.

As I began the long task of processing my visit to the dump, I realized that what was equally as troubling as the environment was the near universal resistance to education I encountered that day. As I saw again and again through my fieldwork and office research, education is the only ticket out of the cycle of poverty. I was dismayed because it’s one thing not to have access to a school, but it’s another not to send your children because you see no value in an education.

Before that field-visit, I’m not sure I grasped that there were people in the world who truly didn’t see value in an education. Days like the one I spent with those rag-pickers are the sorts of experiences that can make one cynical, but, consistent with the emphasis of the LIFE program they can also be interpreted as a reaffirmation that the work you are doing is worthwhile and necessary; as rallying cries for social change.
Throughout my nine months on the LIFE program, I deepened my appreciation for the Jewish values I grew up with: tikkun olam (repairing the world), the importance of community and education, and the importance of exploring and asking tough questions.

After the four months in India, we lived in Jerusalem for another five, a time period in which I was exposed to Jewish customs and practices that seemed equally as foreign and interesting as the pujas in Tirupati.

A lot of people ask about the connection between India and Israel, and why our program is in both places. The simple answer is that Hyderabad and Jerusalem are both complex, hub cities of social innovation. But often I think we have to be taken out of our comfort zone to explore something totally foreign in order to understand the things that seem most familiar and obvious to us, whether in the realm of culture, religion, or ethics.

I discovered a relationship to my own religion after visiting a place where there were no other Jews, and in fact, probably no other white foreigners. In Tirupati I wondered what it would be like to feel so deeply connected to a religion. It wasn’t apparent to me until later on, when I was back in Hyderabad working at my internship, that this was exactly what I was doing. I was living my Judaism. As I climbed the Alipiri path, I thought about things I was thankful for—things like my family, my friends, and the privileges I have in life. After completing the LIFE program, with all that I learned over those nine months, I can now add my Jewish values and community to the list. I don’t look back at the trip to Tirupati with any sort of panging sensation anymore; I am part of a people with a deeply rooted value system to which I strongly relate and believe in. And I feel really good about that (though I wouldn’t mind cracking a few coconuts and stringing up some garlands for a little aesthetic umpff…)

Miriam Wasser is a graduate of the LIFE (Leadership International Fellowship Experience) Program, and recently returned to the US after a year and a half of traveling and adventuring abroad. She graduated from Connecticut College in 2009, and blogs at inpursuitofthecolorful@wordpress.com

L’chaim!
That’s the theme of our BAR MITZVAH festival this year.

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10 ~ 18 November 2012
Cyberport Podium
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Foreign Letters
A Story of Friendship and the Ties that Bind Us
Asian Jewish Life sat down to speak with Ela Thier, writer, director and producer of the film Foreign Letters. The film is highly autobiographical and Thier even makes an on screen appearance at the end.

She also has two other feature films to her credit, Puncture (story-by, co-producer) and The Wedding Cow (writer), which won eighteen international awards, including four Best Feature and four Audience Choice awards. She has also written and directed over a dozen short films. Among them: A Summer Rain (writer-director-producer), on which Foreign Letters is based, won numerous Best Short awards and screened at over 200 film festivals and venues.

For those that grew up in America in the 1980s, Foreign Letters is filled with nostalgia. For Asian Jewish Life, the connection story of friendship between an Israeli girl and a Vietnamese girl is just too perfect. But overall, it is a story that anyone who has ever felt different or struggled with acceptance can relate to. It is a moving and beautiful, and sometimes even funny, story about differences and similarities and the true meaning of friendship.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Was Foreign Letters a story you always wanted to tell? Why?

Ela Thier (ET): I haven’t always thought I would tell this story. In fact, I’ve always written pure fiction, so writing something this autobiographical is a departure for me. It came out of a conversation I was having with a producer while we were discussing another project. She asked me about my life and when I mentioned immigrating to the U.S. at the age of 11 she made some off-the-cuff comment about it being a good topic for a film. She’s a producer I have tremendous respect for, so her comment never quite left me alone.

In 2008, the moment I was notified that I received a fellowship grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts, I knew immediately that I would use it to make a short, and that this would be the topic of the short. In fact, I wrote the short in one sitting that same evening, knowing that a feature would follow.

I think that all of us carry memories of relationships and life events that we want to tell stories about. So in that sense, I’m sure it’s a story that on some level I always wanted to tell. But without this conversation with this particular producer, it wouldn’t have occurred to me that this story is a film.

AJL: Portraying real people authentically can be quite challenging. What did Thuy think of how she was portrayed?

ET: Van (Thuy) was involved in making the feature from the start. She watched the short and was enthusiastic about helping me grow it into a feature. While working on the script I would call her to help remember our past.

Van was also a great resource to Dalena Le who played Thuy. Dalena is a first generation immigrant and speaking with Van about her experiences helped inform her performance.

Van is pleased with the film and feels that it portrays us well. She says that the portrayal of us made her face her past, and feel things again about our friendship and childhoods. I’m thrilled that the film brought us closer together as adults.

AJL: How autobiographical is it? How much of what we see is real? There are some differences in the film from your bio.
ET: I’m a crafty fiction writer, so I knew how to shape a true-life story into an entertaining piece that would hold together dramatically.

So yes, there are key changes: for example, I’m actually one of five children. To simplify the story, I eliminated all of my siblings and just kept one younger one. I did grow up with a single mom who remarried when I was four, so I did have a dad when I was a tween. But again, this is a whole story in it of itself; getting into that would have been a distraction.

Van and I were best friends from the time we met until the end of high school. The biggest change that I made was in taking events that spanned over 7 years and compressed them into a single year. The trials and tribulations in our friendship (the insecurities, “break-ups”, etc.) were things that mostly went on in high school. For the sake of the drama, I compressed it all down.

What’s true to real life, besides the spirit of our friendship and the feel of being a foreigner, are all the details that I think give the film its voice: finding out about floss for the first time; Van (Thuy) waiting outside my house for two hours because she didn’t want to be impolite and ring the bell; being targeted by girls in the school for “looking Jewish”; ice-skating, walking in the woods, writing our “best-friend” contract; my stealing our badge to see if she would miss it (umm… yeah, I did that!); and of course – my beloved typewriter; all that and more are all true to life.

I suppose I should also add that the letters I exchange with Shlomit (the friend in Israel) are excerpts from actual letters, and the letters we see on the screen were the actual letters that she sent me. I had kept all of her letters, and she had kept all of mine.

AJL: Who do you see as the audience?

ET: I predict that many marketers would peg this film as being for tweens, for Jewish audiences, for Asian-Americans, for immigrants.

I’m convinced, however, that thinking this way is a mistake. Human beings, all over the world, are more or less the same. We love, we laugh, we cry, we’re uplifted by caring and human connection.

Logically, I think that anyone who has ever had a friend – and that would be all of us – would find this movie meaningful and see it as being about them.

One of my highlights in screening this film was at the Toronto Jewish film festival. A man in his 80’s came up to me after the screening. He kept trying to tell me that it’s a beautiful film, but he was crying too hard to be able to speak. He was not a 12-year-old girl. He’s just human.

I’ve also gotten comments about how and why this film is more suitable for girls, and that boys wouldn’t be interested in it. Well, a 14-year-old boy confessed to me (in secrecy!) that this is the only film he’s ever seen that has made him cry. So much for films about girls being suitable only for girls!

All of my films are about caring and human connection. So in that sense, I think that the audience to all of my films is the human race.

AJL: What was the message you wanted to send?

ET: Foreign Letters is about the significance of friendship. I think that saying that friendship is significant is another way of saying that human beings are significant. The most interesting, vital,
rich and meaningful aspects of our lives, are our relationships with other people.

We live in a culture that manipulates us to focus on money and material comforts, but I think that all of us, on some level, know in our heart of hearts, that our relationships with people matter more and offer more, than anything we can buy.

Specifically, I would add that many immigrants, like myself, carry the feeling of being uprooted. Everything in life can feel temporary to us. Because there’s a point in our life in which we feel like we lost everything and everyone that we knew, we’re vulnerable to feeling that people and relationships come and go. This film, in some sense, is my love letter to all immigrants – it’s a reminder to us that every relationship we’ve ever had will always be with us. Even if circumstances make it impossible to see someone regularly, once you establish a connection with someone, nothing and no one can make that connection go away.

We all hear a lot of talk about investing our money and making it grow. But I think that real security, real riches, real satisfaction in life, comes from what we invest in people and from making relationships grow. We’d be wise to follow the lead of young people, and especially young women, because they can still remember that this is true. If we don’t make the mistake of “cutesifying” young women and dismissing them, we can turn to them for leadership and let them remind us of what’s really important in life. Money comes and goes, but relationships are for good. That’s the message behind this film.

AJL: Have any of your other films been so heavily autobiographical? Do you plan to make any others? Is it harder or easier to tell your own story as opposed to someone else’s through film?

ET: Foreign Letters is the most directly autobiographical film; I’m very much a fiction writer. But I think that no matter what I write about, the emotional content is always autobiographical. I could be writing about pigs in space, but how the pigs feel, what they care about, and their relationships with each other will always be autobiographical. I imagine that’s true of every writer. So in some sense, it doesn’t really matter to me how autobiographical my writing is in any given project; the themes and ideas in the stories are always personal.

I’m a very prolific writer so yes, I am always working on a film. I’m currently working with Inna Braude, who produced Foreign Letters with me on the production of my next film which we’ll be filming in the spring of 2013. We’re both very excited about it; Foreign Letters is just a first of many films that I’ll be making for years to come.

AJL: How long did you continue to write/correspond with Shlomit?

ET: Shlomit and I corresponded by mail for three years before our communications tapered off. My last letter from her dates to 1985, and I moved to the US in 1982. After I made A Summer Rain in 2008, I searched for her and found her living in Cleveland. I went out there and we reunited after a 30-year absence. We are now regularly in touch.

If you are interested in hosting a public screening of Foreign Letters in your community or organization, please email ThierProductions@gmail.com or visit the film’s website at www.ForeignLettersTheMovie.com.
Justus’ Journey from California to Cambodia
For as long as Ben Justus can remember, volunteering was a part of his life and he largely credits this to the line of Jewish women in his family. His grandmother and mother worked hard to instill in him at a young age the importance of service and giving, largely leading by example. But this legacy is by no means reserved entirely for the women in his family. He also has vivid memories of visiting the temple in Munster, Indiana – it is on a street that is named after his great-grandfather in honor of his dedication to the Jewish community and for helping those in need.

The apple doesn’t fall far from this family tree. Only 27, Justus now lives in the Southeast Asian country of Cambodia where he founded and runs a non-profit organization, EGBOK, that lifts dozens of youth out of poverty every year. The need there is great; 30% of the population lives on less than 45 cents a day.

Growing up in San Diego, Justus began volunteering at a Jewish retirement home at the age of 11 and continued volunteering there until he left to attend Cornell University. There, he studied Hospitality Management at Cornell’s School of Hotel Administration. After graduation, he didn’t follow the typical path of his fellow graduates. He felt he needed to use his passion for the hospitality industry to help those less fortunate and he looked hard to find a path to follow.

After spending time in Cambodia while still a student at Cornell, Justus immediately felt a deep personal connection to the local communities. He struggled with the fact that Cambodia suffered a horrific genocide in the 1970’s when over 20% of the country was murdered. This genocide resonated close to home for him as he draws parallels between the Cambodians and how the Jewish community suffered during the Holocaust. Both communities, devastated and demoralized by genocide, have been rebuilding for decades although the scars from what they endured are very much still present.

“The Jewish community and now the Cambodian community too hold special places in my heart and are proof of how resilient the human spirit is when one endures such tragedy. I simply couldn’t ignore this powerful connection. I am compelled to help the Cambodian people.”

For Justus, the path was the creation of EGBOK, an organization that alleviates poverty by empowering underprivileged young adults in Cambodia with the educational and vocational training needed to support themselves as hospitality professionals, with an emphasis on life skills development. “EGBOK” was a saying of his grandfather’s that stands for “Everything’s Gonna Be OK”. Justus couldn’t think of a better name and a better way to mark the
EGBOK Mission works with community partners that include orphanages, community centers and public schools. It provides students with a foundation course that incorporates hospitality theory, English language development, critical thinking and professional skills while also building confidence.

For students who want to embark on a hospitality career upon completion of the foundation course, EGBOK provides the resources and support needed to enroll and succeed in an intense, year-long training program in hospitality. Students live in EGBOK Mission Living Centers.

EGBOK then works closely with the students to secure and prepare them for their first job in the hospitality industry, while training them in skills needed to replicate the job search process independently. As they move out of the Living Centers and begin their careers, EGBOK continues to provide social support to its former students through mentoring and supplementary courses to allow a smooth transition into social independence, financial stability and self-sustainability.

To learn more about EGBOK Mission visit www.egbokmission.org or contact Ben Justus at benjustus@egbokmission.org.
Being from India, and not being Jewish, it never occurred to me to go to Israel. And, before taking a graduate school class dealing with Israeli foreign policy, the Holy Land was the furthest thing from my mind. Never in my wildest dreams would it have occurred to me that one day I would develop an immense fondness for it. But, after taking the class in early 2008 that’s what happened. Since then, my research revolves around Israel and will likely always do so.

Following the end of the class, I applied for an Israel Government Scholarship for an 8 month research programme in Israel and, when I was accepted, I delighted in the certainty that I would get to step on the soil of the Jewish State. Finally, after a long wait, on 7 October 2010, I landed at Ben-Gurion Airport in Israel. My journey in Israel had begun.

In the days before my departure for Israel, I learned about a family living in Israel that are from my home state of Manipur (a north eastern state in India). They are the Yambem family and I began developing a long distance relationship with them through phone calls and emails. Later on, I discovered that they belong to the Bnei Menashe, one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. In my childhood, I heard very vaguely about this community, mostly from the states of Manipur and Mizoram, that had migrated to Israel.

I certainly wanted to meet the family when I arrived in Israel. One of the first members of the family I met is Yambem Eliyahu, whose real name before conversion was Yambem Shanti. I called him Uncle. I also met Sharon Yambem, the eldest daughter, who helped me get to my dormitory outside of the Bar-Ilan University campus in Ramat-Gan.

The Yambem’s live in the settlement of Nizanim, a few kilometres outside the southern city of Ashkelon. Prior to that, they lived in the settlement of Gush Katif in the southern Gaza Strip. After Israel’s unilateral disengagement from the Strip in 2005, they (along with other settlers) were relocated to different parts of the country. They told me that many other Bnei Menashe families now reside in Kiryat Arba near the outskirts of Hebron and Netivot, another southern city between Beer Sheba and Gaza, Sderot, and also in the settlement of Ma’ale Mikhmas, situated north of the West Bank.

After getting settled in my office and dormitory, I had decided to pay a visit to the Yambem family, but I could only go on the weekend when it wouldn’t interfere with my work. This meant, I was with them on Shabbat. During the aforementioned course in my MA days, I was taught about Shabbat, its rules and regulations. At first I thought it was a very arduous task. But then, my preconceived notions changed and I started looking forward to this day and the break from the daily routines that confined me within the four walls of my cabin at the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies (my office), and my Hakabaim Street apartment in Ramat-Gan.

On my first visit to the Yambem family, Uncle picked me up from the bus station in Ashkelon, and briefed me, during the car ride, about the chores of Shabbat. He gave me the liberty to carry out any activities which were prohibited to Jews during Shabbat. But, I told that him my desire was to experience the
practices they followed on this day. As I reached his house, I was introduced to his wife- Aunty Esther, Abok (which means Grandma and Uncle’s mother-in-law), his niece Reut Mordechai, and his son David. I received a very warm welcome and felt very at-home. However, everyone was busy with the preparation for Shabbat—cleaning, cooking, washing, etc. When the sun was about to set, they got ready for Shabbat, and then finally lit the Shabbat candles. Suddenly, a beautiful silence gripped the entire Nizanim settlement, and I could only hear the chirping of the birds who were flying into their nests. Uncle soon left for his evening prayers at one of the synagogues nearby.

My first dinner with the Yambem family began with the Kiddush. I enjoyed the entire observance. I learned that on most Shabbat evenings, members of every family visit their friends in the locality. To my surprise, none of the family members left, but instead began asking me about my experience in Israel and then about Manipur, their birthplace. I could see the nostalgia in their eyes. After hours of conversation, we retired for the night.

The most interesting thing was that they had me sleep in their bomb-shelter! Thereafter, most Shabbats (for the next eight months), I continued to spend my time with this Bnei Menashe family.

As time passed by, I began to build up more and more interest in learning about the community. Upon hearing about my trip to Israel though the Yambem family, several people who were once living in Manipur came to visit me. Rounds of questions were pounded on me, especially with regard to the current law and order situation in the state (Manipur). Some of them used to tell me about how they miss their birthplace. In our conversations, I learned that they still have an affinity for the place and would want to come back and visit with their loved ones and friends. But, all of them are too busy earning for their survival and looking after their children. Most of the senior members of the community have only praise for the Israeli authorities for their help and provision of various facilities and services.

However, I was very surprised when one of the women I met expressed her desire to leave Israel and go back to India for good. She, despite living in Israel for almost two decades, could not still find an emotional attachment to the Jewish State, and could not call it her home. “I don’t feel that I belong here” is what she told me. I went a step further and asked her ‘why’? To which she replied, “I still can’t relate to the people and the place.”

Another interesting aspect of my interactions with this community was meeting their children. Most of them were born in Manipur and Mizoram, but many of the youngsters are still school aged and only a few have started to serve in the compulsory national service. During my stay, I had the privilege of meeting the first IDF officer from the Bnei Menashe community, named Shalem Gin, who was born in Mizoram and made Aliyah at the age of four with his family. He achieved the rank of Second Lieutenant. With him as an inspiration, many others are likely to follow his footsteps and make the community proud of such achievements.

Since many of the children made Aliyah at a very young age, or were born in Israel, communication remained a handicap for me. I couldn’t speak Hebrew and they were unable to speak in English fluently. Moreover, they have seemed to lose the affinity their parents and grandparents still carry for their ancestral birth place in India. Because of these language difficulties and the lack of connection, they were not very keen to interact with me in the way that the older community members did. Interestingly, Sharon however still holds onto memories of her childhood days in Manipur, and expressed her fondness for Manipuri film actors, food and Indian cinema.

As these families made Aliyah on the basis that their religion was Judaism and their original home was Israel, most of the parents ensure that their children follow the religious practices strictly.
Wearing kippot and reading Torah were some of the commonly accepted practices that I observed. But, I also learned that a few of the children were beginning to be heavily influenced by outside cultures that are not necessarily in line with the community and their doctrines. They were assimilating. This is a major concern among the parents.

On the festival front, it was very unfortunate that I could not spend as much time with them as I would have liked. However, on Purim, I had the opportunity to have lunch with the family. It was a day full of celebrations in Nizanim, and I also met a few families from Mizoram. I regret not getting to spend Pesach with the family. This particular festival has a great resemblance to Cheiraoba (Manipuri New Year) which is celebrated around the same time in April every year. One similarity lies with the cleansing of the utensils and the entire house.

Also, when I learned the importance of the Bar Mitzvah, I noted a similarity with a Manipuri ritual called Lukun Thangba- ‘becoming of age’ in both the cases. I thought much about these similar practices, and wondered if there were more similarities. This is something that needs to be studied thoroughly.

My short time with the Bnei Menashe community in Israel will always be remembered fondly. It was such an incredible feeling to meet people from my region miles across the sea. I still miss the stories told to me by Abok about her yesteryears at the border village of Behiang in Manipur, bordering Myanmar (formerly Burma). Every Shabbat, or Friday here in India, I reminiscence about the time I spent with Uncle and his family. The thunderous laughter of Aunty Esther, Che Rudy, Ruth, and the cute antics of Oriah still echoes in my mind. The late night chats with Sharon and her friends, and Reut are also still fresh in my mind. I look forward to the day when I can return to Israel and the Yambem family.

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The Russian Jews of Harbin

During the first half of the twentieth century, there were three well-established Jewish communities in China. Shanghai was the largest and best known, Tientsin (now Tianjin) was the smallest, and Harbin was predominantly a Russian community and the last to dissolve.

In Mara Moustafine’s family narrative, Secrets and Spies: The Harbin Files (Random House, 2002), the author traces her mother’s roots in Harbin, particularly what became of her deceased grandfather Girsch Onikul, aunt Manya Onikul and uncle Abram Onikul.

The Onikul family originally came from Minsk to Hailar, a trading town near Harbin, in the early 1900s. Moustafine herself grew up in Harbin and left at the late date of 1959 when her family immigrated to Australia. The Jewish communities in Tientsin and Shanghai had all but disappeared a full decade earlier.

It wasn’t until the 1990s that Moustafine, who worked in Australia’s foreign service, visited the Soviet Union and stumbled across a stack of documents at her aunt’s house. What struck her were the pardons for a handful of her relatives, some of them posthumously. Thus began a decade-long investigation into how her grandfather, aunt, and uncles perished under Stalinist purges.

Although the Onikul family had strong ties to Harbin in China, many in the family felt like their future was in the Soviet Union. And with the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in the 1930s, it was only natural to look toward the stability of the USSR. Or so they thought.

Once the first set of family members immigrated to the Soviet Union, communication with China was all but cut off. So the next waves of relatives to arrive in the USSR couldn’t have known how difficult life had become there. With the Onikul’s history in China, the Soviet government branded them spies of the Japanese. The promised land of the USSR soon became an unfathomable nightmare to Mara Moustafine’s family.

It’s amazing how Moustafine uncovered the fates of her relatives. With the help of a former KGB agent, Moustafine learns most of the answers to this complex puzzle. Secrets and Spies is an eye-opening narrative of a Jewish family in China during the 1930s. It lends credence to the notion that China was one of the safest places for Jews during the war.

While many families in Harbin returned to similar fates in the USSR, others looked toward what was to become the new Jewish state of Israel.

Yaacov Liberman’s family also came to Harbin from Russia. In his memoir, My China: Jewish Life in the Orient, 1900-1950 (Gefen Publishing, 1998), Liberman writes about growing up in Harbin in a family that is not overtly religious, but attends services on the High Holidays and when family and friends become Bar Mitzvah. As Liberman writes, the synagogues in China were built according the Orthodox practice of separating men and women, but as he explains, people were often much less observant in their homes.

Liberman’s family and friends weren’t left-leaning like the Onikuls in Moustafine’s book. Instead, they were ardent Zionists. At a young age, Liberman joined Betar, a Zionist youth movement. He dressed in his Betar military uniform for his Bar Mitzvah and vowed that he would also wear it when he married. Still in his childhood, he became active in Betar athletic activities and excelled at the 100-meter track event.

Because his family was middle class, they had the funds to send young Yaacov to study in Shanghai before the age of ten. Later, he was sent to a Christian missionary school in Pyongyang, Korea, with another Jewish friend. There the boys never felt like they belonged, especially when a teacher tried to convert them.

For university, Liberman returned to Shanghai to study at St. John’s University, but with the outbreak of World War II, Liberman became further involved in Betar activities. Word slowly leaked out of Europe about the Holocaust, although no one would learn the real truth until after the war. In the mid to late 1930s, Liberman witnessed mass migration to Shanghai by Eastern European Jews. By then his parents had moved to Shanghai, too, and lived in a quaint apartment in the French Concession. They were never forced into the Hongkew Ghetto as were the newer Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe.

With the conclusion of the war, many of Liberman’s friends settled in the US for further studies, but Liberman set his heart on immigrating to the new Jewish homeland of Israel. Through his involvement in Betar, he became active in helping Shanghai, Tientsin, and Harbin Jews to immigrate to Israel. He and his wife Lea were among the first Jews who left China for Israel in 1948.

But Liberman didn’t stay in Israel for long. In the 1960s, he lived in Japan long enough to finish his undergraduate degree and complete a master’s degree. In 1975, he, Lea, and their three children moved to Taiwan. There, Liberman organized the first Jewish community and went on to lead it for the next decade until he settled in the US in 1985. As of the publication of My China, Liberman and his wife were retired and living in San Diego.

These two books show how even in a small community like Jewish Harbin, there was a great diversity of opinion, people held a wide range of political philosophies and expressed their Judaism in very different ways. ☼
The tradition and custom of Malidah has been prevalent among the Bene Israel community in one form or another probably from the time of their exodus from the land of Israel about 2,300 years ago. Originally the service was performed ritualistically as they had no prayer books. Around the 16th century C.E., however, this tradition was codified with selected prayers when the prayer books and transliterations of the Hebrew prayers became generally available to the Bene Israel community. Since then this practice has remained unchanged and is still practiced in its traditional form today.

The Malidah service is performed prior to an engagement or wedding, but it is also performed for a variety of other reasons as well. It is performed at the time of the birth of a son prior to the circumcision and at the naming a daughter, at the dedication or rededication of a synagogue, for a promotion, to mark a successful achievement, as well as when making a vow or as a thanksgiving when a vow is fulfilled.

Malidah is also performed for Tu B’Shevat and at the culmination of the Simchat Torah Service after the fruits are removed from the sukkah. Likewise it is performed when visiting the traditional Bene Israel Holy Site at Khandallah in the Konkan Region, where tradition has it that the Khandalkar family witnessed an apparition of the ascension of Elijah, the Prophet to Heaven, in a chariot of fire. The Bene Israel have a special connection to the Prophet Elijah, the last and only prophet the ancestors of the Bene Israel were aware of when they left the land of Israel centuries earlier.

Many anthropologists believe that the custom of the Bene Israel Malidah service was borrowed from other communities, but certain critical elements permit this theory to be refuted. Thanksgiving offerings and peace offerings were an integral part of Jewish ritualistic service during the period prior to the destruction of the Second Temple. At the most one may concede that the elements and components of the Malidah Service were adapted to locally available ingredients as has been the case of many Jewish customs of other Jewish communities.

Prior to the service, an oil lamp is lit called The Lamp of Eliyahu Ha Navi and a Bracha is said over it. There are a variety of methods of making the traditional Malidah plate. At its most basic form, though, the table and plate setting of the Malidah includes the following items: a plate of pounded rice soaked and drained of water and mixed with grated coconuts, powdered sugar, chopped dry fruits, grated coconuts, and white raisins surrounded by at least five types of fruits which must include dates and orange (Ha’Etz), bananas (Ha’Adama) at least one new fruit of the season (for the Shehekianu Bracha) and myrtle leaves or rose petals for the Atzei Besamim Bracha. Spiced boiled chicken liver and gizzard are added on the Malidah or in a separate plate. After the prayers, the liver and gizzard are cut into small pieces and distributed to all the congregants.

The inclusion of liver and gizzard is representative of a tradition established in the days of the Temple. When a person came to the Temple to offer a sacrifice the ritual slaughter was performed by a Levite, but the Levite was not permitted to charge for his services, so the liver and gizzard were reserved as his portion. If one wanted the liver and gizzard from him, they had to pay the Levite for that portion. This is similar to the custom of the ceremony of Pidyon Haben. The question then arises as to why specifically the liver & gizzard? In observing pack animals hunting, the liver & gizzard are eaten only by the Alpha Male i.e. the leader of the pack. The Levites were seen as leaders of the Jewish people; hence traditionally and without even realizing it, the Bene Israel still follow a time honored tradition today symbolizing their role as community leaders.
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