Laura Margolis in the Spotlight
Portrait of a heroine in Shanghai
A Strange Foreign Import
Jewish studies in China

Cover photo: Laura Margolis, 1947, Port de Bouc, France, courtesy of the JDC
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.

• Help other Jewish non-profit organizations with a regional focus to grow along with us.

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We will return with InBox (Letters from our readers) in our next issue.

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Welcome to Issue 8 of Asian Jewish Life. Here in Hong Kong, we are settling in after winter holidays and are already gearing up for Chinese New Year in just a few weeks (our third and final New Year’s celebration for 5772). It is also the start of Asian Jewish Life’s 3rd year.

Chinese and Jewish traditions both focus on the significance of numbers. The number three in the Jewish tradition is certainly a good number. To name just a few references: we are divided into three groups (Kohen, Levite, Israelite), there are three major pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot) and there are three patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).

At Asian Jewish Life, we have in place significant plans for our 3rd year to grow AJL both as a magazine and as an organization that builds on the strength of our magazine. This includes the launch of an Asian Jewish Life speaker’s series that will bring speakers to many of your communities. Topics will include: The Contemporary Jewish Communities of the Far East – an Overview; Jewish Hong Kong and Shanghai– The War Years; Raising a Jewish Hong Kong – some of our favorite regional gatherings and plan to host in 2012. We also have plans to participate in the JDC’s speaker’s series, AJL’s own photography editor, Allison Heiliczer, had the rare opportunity to worship in this synagogue and describes her own journey to Cochin in Life, Vision and Persistence in Jew Town.

It seems we couldn’t get enough of India this issue and bring you a special look at the Bene Israel traditions of henna, mehendi and Malida. Photographer Yoranaf Rafael Reuben focuses his lenses on Mehendi in a beautiful photo essay, The Beauty of Tradition – Mehendi in full color. While food writer and food photographer, Shulie Madnick, honed in on Malida in The Malida Ceremony – The Core of the Bene Israel Tradition, complete with a recipe.

But it is not all India for us this issue. We stop very briefly in Vietnam for a Writer’s Desk piece by Raquelle Azran titled, Treasure Hunting in Hanoi.

AJL Books Editor, Susan-Blumberg Kason, interviews Alan Paul on his new book Big in China, Rocking it Big in Beijing– An Interview with Alan Paul. Learn the secrets to becoming a stay-at-home dad and rock star in Beijing.

From Shanghai past, we bring you Susan Blumberg-Kason’s book reviews, City on the Sea: Timeless novels about 1930s Shanghai. She specifically looks at Vicki Baum’s Shanghai ’37 and Emily Hahn’s China to Me. Though far from being new books, these works, first published in 1939 and 1944, consecutively, are a must on your reading lists.

And last, but not least, the Viewpoint article, by Jordan Potash, Here and Now- A Jewish understanding of Buddhist teaching explores the power of the term Hineni.

Please write in and tell us what you think. For those of you using the Gregorian calendar, a bit belated Happy New Year. And for those of you looking East, it’s a bit early, but Kung Hei Fat Choi (Happy Chinese New Year) from Asian Jewish Life!
Life, Vision, and Persistence in Jew Town
We went to Cochin without a plan, as this is often how the best trips unfold. There were so many unanswered questions: What does Jewish life look like in Cochin in India and its “Jew Town”? Is there any contemporary Jewish life there? How did the Jews there celebrate sukkot (which is when we were there)? How would we celebrate sukkot? Were we permitted to visit the Paradesi Synagogue? Would we be able to attend services? My internet search yielded more questions than answers. “Surrender” I kept telling myself as these questions elicited ambiguous responses from numerous sources. For my husband, Josh, though attending services was a priority for him – his consistent, steadfast belief was unshaken. He simply stated, “G-d will provide.”

We turned the corner in the quiet streets, and then Josh, like a child seeing snow for the first time, zealously pointed at that yellow flag. He powerfully shouted: “Chabad!” I echoed his excitement by shouting twice and throwing up my hands: “Chaaaaabad!”

We had already settled ourselves with delicious dosas (traditional Indian pancakes made from rice and lentils), walking back towards our hotel when first we spotted Chabad. The center was not listed on the internet. Prior to that point, the possibility of attending services seemed dim, yet we wanted to acknowledge the festival’s existence and find some way to celebrate it here. We had resolved to walk to the synagogue in the morning and hope for the best. Turning that corner not only highlighted a current, Jewish presence but also altered the trajectory of our trip and the chag in magical ways.

Walking up to Chabad’s door, we suddenly felt giddy, as if we were walking into Willy Wonka’s Spiritual Chocolate Factory. Once inside, we could smell Israeli dishes. We were transported momentarily to someplace very familiar in our Jewish past. We walked through the house and joined the rabbi, his wife, Indian Jews, and Israelis sitting in the sukkah, speaking Hebrew, laughing, eating, living Judaism. With the moonlight fighting to reach us in the sukkah, we felt both apart of and removed from the world. “Welcome!” Rabbi Bernstein’s huge smile said to us; his jet-black beard enveloping that smile. Sharing only a few words saved for introduction, we began praying with them; prayer seemed a more powerful connection than, “Hi, I’m Allison. I am…”
Those precious moments together praying and laughing color the current Jewish life and energy that is often neglected in articles and books, which describe Jew Town as a dying community with little present and no future to speak of. As with many other such centers in pockets of the world, though small, this one represents life, vision, and persistence. Practically, though, it represented an opportunity to sit in a sukkah, use a lulav and etrog, and have Shabbat dinner with fellow travelers.

The walk from the Chabad, with the rabbi and rebbetzin, to the synagogue for sukkot, surely is not described in any guidebook. The next morning we made this walk with them, along with a handful of secular Israelis and Indian Jews donned in saris and Indian garb. With goats crossing the street, tuk tuks sputtering away, women carrying gallons of water on their heads, children playing cricket, and strong, sweet smells of ginger and black pepper pervading the air, I could not pinpoint exactly where we were in my mind. Yet, I knew we were where we needed to be, and my heart danced all the way to the synagogue that morning.

Arriving at near-forgotten synagogues around the world, it sometimes feels like stumbling upon an exciting yet sad secret. In the mingling of these contrasts, there is a peaceful space found when an individual experiences a synagogue.

The Paradesi Synagogue is a stunning, Sephardic structure full of bold colors and intense suggestions of the past. Its secrecy lies in its current life presence. Most visitors, escorted by guides, are unable to attend services, and view the synagogue as a museum. This inevitably creates a distance between the visitor and the structure’s current vitality. Once we arrived at the synagogue and took off our shoes—this is India—we sat hoping that other Jews would attend. With nine men present that morning, the possibility of obtaining a minyan seemed bleak; this was not Jerusalem or Manhattan. With
only a handful of Jews living close by, and most already in attendance, the men thought to walk to a congregator’s home and ask whether his health would allow him to participate. He arrived twenty minutes later in a wheelchair. With his wife pushing him, this man—who looked at least 85 years old—sacrificed his own rest for the collective, something that has fed his soul his entire life according to friends and neighbors. Watching him pray in shul, I smile and tear up at the same time: I am watching the union between Chabad’s injecting life into the community and the community’s existing vitality.

After services, Josh and I walk freely around the town and see remnants of Jewish past and wonder just how alive Judaism is outside of Chabad and the Paradesi Synagogue. There is an exhilaration and sadness to this questioning. Stars of David, unused synagogues, various suggestions of once-Jewish homes, spice stores bearing “Jew” in its name are present in the town. When I see a Star of David or unused synagogue, the Jews of the past here come alive. I watch their souls flavor the current Jewish life in Cochin, and converse with the Jews still present.

Traveling to Jew Town reinforced my belief in the unshakeable, spiritual commitment and resiliency of our people. Experiencing the Indian man completing the minyan in his wheelchair reinforced that Jewish life transcends culture and age and ignores crumbling physical structures: our religion is not about physical representation but rather spiritual dedication—persisting in the face of adversity, manifesting Jewish values, holding on to tradition, and evolving both individually and collectively.

Leaving Cochin, I sit on the plane, close my eyes, and feel grateful for our experience. I settle on acceptance: The mystery of our existence and the persistence in maintaining it is alive, colorful, and complex. So too are the Jews of Cochin.
Rocking it Big in Beijing

An Interview with Alan Paul
In 2005 Alan Paul moved from the New York area to Beijing with his wife Rebecca and their three young children following Rebecca’s appointment as the Wall Street Journal’s China Bureau Chief. A freelance journalist, most notably for Slam and Guitar World magazines, Alan Paul also wrote a column called “The Expat Life” for WSJ.com from 2005 until 2009. His new memoir, Big in China: My Unlikely Adventures Raising a Family, Playing the Blues, and Becoming a Star in Beijing (Harper, 2011), chronicles his years in China as a journalist, stay at home father, and blues musician for a band named Woodie Alan. Asian Jewish Life recently sat down with Alan Paul to discuss his book and his unique experience in China.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): It’s ironic that you had initial reservations about moving to China after your first trip there, but also experienced the most difficult case of reverse culture shock when you returned to the US three years later. What were your first impressions of China and how did they change by the time you left China?

Alan Paul (AP): I’ll start with what didn’t change: China is an exciting, fast-changing place where you never know just what exactly is going on. I didn’t really have reservations after my first trip there. I fell in love with the pace and excitement the moment I arrived in Beijing. However, I got quite sick for a few days on our initial first quick “look-see” trip over and the illness knocked the confidence right out of me.

In retrospect, we probably could have saved a lot of angst by pushing our return back a day or two, because we had to make two flights back and I was really miserable. I got over this pretty quickly and once I did, and we decided to move, I pledged to never look back again.

I’m not sure if any of my initial impressions were completely altered, but everything certainly deepened. I think the biggest misperception about China, and one I must have shared to some extent, is that the people were faceless drones. I think my book illustrates the extent to which this is absurd. In promoting the book, I have spoken to hundreds of people and been a bit dismayed how many of them – including many interviewers and other very insightful, bright people – were surprised that China even had bars, bands, or nightlife.

AJL: Stay-at-home dads must be quite a foreign concept in China. What kind of reaction did you get about this from your friends in China, both expats and locals?

AP: Well, some people didn’t know what to make of me. I think in some ways it was a positive for me in terms of the expat community. It made me a bit of an outsider, which forced me to push out and explore things on my own a bit. The little expat bubble wasn’t that comfortable for me, so I leapt into other things pretty quickly, which really served me well.

Some Chinese were sort of astounded by me and expressed admiration. There was a black [unlicensed] cab driver named Mr. Lu who we used a lot and he always told me how smart I was to have my wife do all the work. He thought it was a rather remarkable situation.

AJL: Did you find that your Jewish identity changed once you moved to...
Beijing? Did you feel more of a minority as a Caucasian American or as a Jew?

AP: I was certainly more aware being a minority as a Caucasian American. When we went out with our kids, we would sometimes have whole groups of people following us around, especially outside of Beijing. Within the expat community, I was also quite conscious of being a minority as Jew. I had some disputes with my kids’ British school over the explicitly religious nature of the “winter show,” which one year for my eldest son was a play about Jesus’ birth. I tried to explain that it would have been a lovely play for a church but was totally wrong for a school, but I got absolutely nowhere. I had to decide whether or not I was going to become the obstinate Jew or not. I decided to drop it, only insisting that Jacob not be punished in any way if he refused to sing the songs in music class. The other aspect that was interesting is we had good friends who were Australian Jews and they were shocked that I was so annoyed by this. It made me appreciate American separation of church and state/school.

We arrived in mid-August and Rosh Hashanah was just a few weeks later. I found the experience profoundly moving. It felt optional and my decision to go was a decision – I was removed from merely doing things out of habit and had an opportunity to really think about what it all meant to me. I had an option to take a few years off from religion and I found that I really did not want to. I had a profound sense of just how tiny of a minority we are in the world, as well. No one outside the little room cared that it was a holiday and all of that made it more special for me. It just all became more private and more internal and therefore more meaningful.

AJL: You addressed the issue of drinking in your book and how you found yourself drinking more than you would have liked. Then you learned that your band mate Woodie Wu was a recovering alcoholic. Did you find it difficult to live in a society that doesn’t talk about alcoholism yet expects people to drink at every social outing? Do you see any parallels between Jewish culture in which wine is important in many of the holidays, yet as a whole isn’t known for big drinkers?

AP: Well, Woodie was not a recovering alcoholic when we got together; he was a practicing alcoholic. I did not realize the extent of his problem, which is something I would eventually look back and really question myself about: was I blind or was he good at hiding his problem? It was more the latter, but it was a good lesson on keeping your eyes open and being attuned to your friends and potential problems.

Chinese culture recognizes that some people drink too much, of course, but they don’t understand the disease model of alcoholism that we do. I’m not sure I really see a Jewish/Chinese connection about drinking. I’m not sure, but I don’t think there is a particularly high rate of alcoholism in China, but there is an expectation that at certain social gatherings – especially business banquets or dinners – people will drink to great excess. I can’t think of anything parallel in Jewish social culture.

AJL: You are a great example of someone who makes the most of what he’s dealt. Do you feel that the key to happiness as an expat is to follow a passion like you did with music? If you hadn’t formed Woodie Alan, do you think you would have been as happy and fulfilled in China?
**AP:** I didn’t really form the band until toward the end of my second year in China and it didn’t become a major part of my life until my third year, and I was very happy and fulfilled before that. It certainly changed a lot for me and brought me inside Chinese culture in a way that nothing else could have. On the other hand, my family probably took a few less trips within China than we would have because I got pretty busy.

I do feel that the key to happiness is to follow your passion or find new ones. I did a lot of hiking on non-repaired sections of the Great Wall and exploring Beijing’s old neighborhoods during my first two years for instance and probably would have done more had the band not taken off. I think the real key to happiness is making sure you find friends who are not trapped in a bubble, and are not complaining all the time. Every expat community has its share of people like that and they can drag you down.

**AJL:** What is the one piece of advice you would give to someone moving to China for the first time that you wished you’d known before you moved there?

**AP:** Stay calm, enjoy every moment and have fun. There will be hard days, but there won’t be boring ones, so embrace the chaos and enjoy the adventures.

**AJL:** What was most difficult about moving back to New Jersey after living in China for three years?

**AP:** Not living in China anymore. I don’t mean to be glib, but I understandably get asked this question a lot and it’s hard to answer because we really missed everything. We missed our friends and the camaraderie we all shared. We missed the kids’ school and friends. We missed the sense of adventure that could be a part of even a simple trip to the grocery store. And of course, I missed my band terribly. It’s hard to categorize that, but it was the guys in the band, the performances, the preparing for the shows, the backstage hangouts with Chinese musicians, the post-gig meals – all of it. And we knew that we weren’t returning to that life, so we were kind of mourning it, in a way that we never did for our life back here in the U.S., to which we knew we would some day return.

**AJL:** Have your kids continued to study Mandarin? Do they miss China?

**AP:** Sadly no. My oldest Jacob did for a good six months and then he got really busy preparing for his bar mitzvah. It just felt like too much to have him studying Hebrew and Mandarin at the same time while also keeping up with school. They all miss China in various ways and to various degrees. The dull daily ache has faded with time, however. We went back as a family in the summer of 2010 after having been gone for about 18 months and that was a great thing to do. It strengthened their memories and bonds and helped them move on.

**AJL:** Ivan Reitman purchased the movie rights to Big in China. Congratulations! Who would you like to play your character in the film? Your wife’s character?

**AP:** Thank you. I swear I don’t have anyone in mind to play me or Rebecca – as long as they are two fantastic, beautiful people! Honestly, it’s not that I don’t care – because of course I do – but I’m really focused on getting a good script and feeling good about the story and the depictions of us and our life and our friends and China… if that all comes out well, then I’m confident some great actors will want to be involved. And all of that is much more important than someone who looks like us. I’ve been talking to the screenwriter a lot and feel good about where he’s headed. If things keep moving forward, I hope to visit China with him and Ivan and show them around my world.

**AJL:** Are you planning to write another book?

**AP:** I am working on a Panda Dad book based on the column I wrote for the Wall Street Journal in rebuttal to the Tiger Mom. It has some great potential, but I’m still not sure about it. I have been very active promoting Big in China, finalizing the movie deals and now doing some rewrites for a Chinese-language edition. When that wraps up, I will turn my attention squarely to Panda Dad and see if it’s something I definitely want to do.
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A History of the Parur Synagogue

Trial by fire, inquisition and neglect
Many people have heard of the Jews of Cochin (today Kochi) in southwestern India, but far fewer know that there were in fact other small Jewish communities over the centuries in this same region of the country, each revolving around a synagogue. Eight such buildings, all located in the central part of the State of Kerala, survive in some form today. The most famous of these synagogues is the Paradesi synagogue in Jew Town, Cochin, with its beautiful blue tiles imported from China. In 1968, Indira Gandhi attended its quarter-centenary celebrations and the Indian government issued a special commemorative stamp on the occasion. Today, there are only nine Paradesi Jews left in Jew Town, and a Chabad Rabbi conducts the services, pulling in Israeli backpackers and American and other Jewish tourists to make up the minyan.

In the 1990’s, the interior of another synagogue located just down the street from the Paradesi Synagogue was brought to the Israel Museum and is a great attraction in the newly reopened museum. In February 2006, an abandoned synagogue which had in the past served the Kerala Jews in the verdant village of Chennamangalam was re-opened as a tourist site with an exhibition on the local Jews. It was initiated by the two authors of this article, coordinated by Marian Sofaer, and funded by the Koret Foundation.

In 2010, the Kerala government decided to fund a new project to restore the next of Kerala Jews’ abandoned synagogues in the town of Parur, also called Vadakkan Paravoor, located north of Kochi. This synagogue, set on Jew Street, Parur, near the town center, represents the most complete and elaborate example of a Jewish house of prayer from the Kerala region incorporating many local influences of design, as well as longstanding Jewish building traditions. Once there was a vibrant Jewish community here, but today, all the Jews from Parur (with the exception of one or two) live in Israel or elsewhere. The careful restoration of the Parur synagogue is almost complete.

It is commonly thought that the Parur synagogue was built as early as 1164 C.E. The original building fell into disrepair, and another structure was erected on the same site in 1616. A stone slab with Hebrew text on an exterior wall within the synagogue compound testifies to this. It is believed that the ner tamid (everlasting light) once hanging in the 1164 synagogue was moved to the seventeenth century building. According to this legend, the Jews of Parur were so rich and proud that they offered incense at a public altar. For this act of hubris, since their behavior seemed to recall a religious ceremony reserved only to the Temple, the Parur synagogue congregation was stricken with the plague. Their twelfth century synagogue fell into disuse, and the ner tamid was hung out on the street as a sign of contrition, where it was seen nearly two hundred years later by an English observer.

David Yaacov Castiel, the fourth mudaliyar (leader) of the Kerala Jews, was responsible for rebuilding the Parur synagogue in 1616. According to a local Jewish song written by a Jewish poet to honor the synagogue, a fire damaged the building around 1662, and it was refurbished. This blaze could have been set by the Portuguese colonizers since they had laid claim to Kerala and also burned the Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi about the same time. The Kerala Jews never suffered from anti-Semitism at the hands of their Indian neighbors, but
the Portuguese colonizers even tried to institute the Inquisition.

For more 120 years, the renovated synagogue served the needs of the congregation until a Muslim tyrant, Tipu Sultan (1750-1799) from Mysore, and his armies invaded Kerala in 1783. Tipu Sultan was responsible for the destruction of thousands of non-Muslim religious buildings, which included Hindu and Jain temples, Christian edifices and churches, and synagogues. He also tortured and forced the conversion of followers outside his faith, or had them killed. It is likely that during this period that the Parur synagogue was attacked again.

Writing about the Kerala Jews, the Church of England missionary Rev. Thomas Dawson, stationed in Kochi from 1817, visited Parur and other synagogues in the area. His observations, accounted by W. S. Hunt, seem to confirm that even after the passing of more than a quarter of a century the synagogue had not been repaired. By 1790, the Third Anglo-Mysore War marked the doom of Tipu Sultan as he ceded the kingdom of Malabar to the British by 1792. Since this formidable menace to the Jews of Parur had been wiped out, and even though the British were tolerant to Kerala's Jews, it may seem odd that it took so long to rebuild the synagogue. Considering that historians have written about the prosperity and local acceptance of the Parur Jewish community, the logic would be that they would have had the means to restore the synagogue to its former glory. Yet during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Parur Jewish community had declined in numbers and became less prosperous.

Dawson's particularly bleak account asserts that they had undergone years of hardship and health issues, and that
they were facing discrimination. These factors could explain why the rebuilding of a proper synagogue took so long. Based on Rev. Dawson’s fieldwork, most of the structure as it stands today, with the possible exception of the gatehouse, could therefore date no earlier than the second decade of the nineteenth century.

When Parur’s extant synagogue was realized on the same site as the previous building, it was constructed in the centuries-old Kerala tradition using locally quarried laterite stone blocks that were veneered in chunam, a polished lime. The thick walls, normally whitewashed, were punctured by large wooden doors and windows. Despite any memory of Portuguese aggression against the Jews, the Parur synagogue incorporated Portuguese colonial detail, such as swirling rope patterns, circular attic vents, wooden railings and struts, and revealed bands of trim on its wall surfaces. With its locally cut and crafted wood roof framing exposed at its deep eaves in response to the annual monsoons, clay roof tiles covering its pitched surfaces, and carved wood ends, the Parur synagogue is an archetypical example of the Kerala style.

As with other Kerala synagogues, the Parur synagogue is made up of not one building but a collection of parts forming a distinct compound, including enclosed spaces, covered yet unenclosed rooms, outdoor walled areas, and courtyard zones. Among all Kerala synagogues, Parur is notable for having the greatest number of connected and consecutive pieces which have survived fully intact, albeit rotting and crumbling in recent decades until the current restoration effort.

Unique to the synagogue at Parur is the way its parts are formally linked in highly axial, extended, and ceremonial fashion. Of Kerala’s surviving synagogue buildings, the one in Parur has the longest procession from the gatehouse to the innermost Ark. A similar organization can also be seen in some Hindu temples of Kerala and at other religious buildings in the region, including Syrian Christian and Catholic churches and mosques. As a local building type, there is little doubt that synagogue architecture was influenced by local architecture of buildings belonging to other religions, as well as sharing common liturgical and spatial elements with synagogues the world over.

So when can one view the newly renovated Parur synagogue? Benny Kuriakose, the conservation architect appointed by the Kerala government to direct the work, stated this week that the estimated date of opening is April 2012, although it could be postponed to next autumn. He said: “There is about 15% work left… the new special officer who took charge in November 2011 has started looking at things seriously.” The actual inauguration will take place at a later date but feelers have been put out by the government, to India’s Prime Minister, Dr. Man Mohan Singh in the hopes that he will attend the ceremony.
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Section 2

BOMBAY and CALCUTTA JOURNALS

1. DORESH TOV L'AMO - THE HEBREW GAZETTE (Lit.). Vol.3, nos.1-50; Bombay, 1857-8 (original binding). + Vol.5, nos.24, 26, 28, 32, 35 & 48 (Yaari no.1) (2*) Price $3,000 o.n.o.

2. PAIRAH - THE JEWISH GAZETTE. Calcutta 1878-1895. 11 vols. 1st issue Vol.1, (June 21, 1878) in facsimile; Vol.2-8 complete; Vol.9 lacking pages 127-30 of issue no.19; Vol.11 lacking issue no.16, & pages 277-280 of issue no.19. (Yaari no.3) (2*) Price $10,000 o.n.o.

3. PAIRAH (as per no.2) - 3 extra issues: Vol.3, no.12, 1880; & Vol.10, nos.19 & 28

4. MAGGID MEISHARIM. Calcutta 1891-1901. Various issues, starting Year 2, no.1. 321 leaves, bound together in 1 vol. (Yaari no.4) (2*) Price $3,000 o.n.o.

5. SHOSHANA - THE JEWISH GAZETTE. Calcutta 1901-2. Nos.4-5, 7-17, & 19-24 (of 24 issues), bound cloth. + a few extra loose issues in separate folder. (Yaari no.5) (2*) Price $3,000 o.n.o.

6. ZION'S MESSENGER. Vol.4, no.6. Bombay, May 1924 (small 2*) Price $600


8. THE ISRAELITE. Bombay (as per no.7). Vols.7, 8 & 9 only (1923-1925) $1,500

9. DABAR BETTO - DAVAR AHIR. Bombay 1917-18 (series of pamphlets, nos.1-7, complete, in 1 vol.). + a second set of loose issues. (8*) Price $600

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Treasure Hunting in Hanoi
In 1995, I moved to Hanoi with a thirteen year old son, four suitcases and a manuscript. We lived in the Old Quarter, in a tiny house which opened onto a common courtyard. Our front door was a metal grate, which opened accordion-style to accommodate visiting bicycles, and we breakfasted on the sidewalk along with our neighbors, sitting on tiny stools and sipping fragrant bowls of beef pho with noodles.

I had taken a sabbatical to write. Every morning, after the rickety school bus collected Jack, I wrote for four hours straight. And then I was free to do as I pleased, until Jack’s return in the late afternoon.

At first, I spent every free moment exploring Hanoi’s magical alleys and markets. Only when the days fell into a routine did I realize that I was without my bookshelves, or a library, or even a bookstore. Of the four suitcases we had brought, one was packed with books. Within a month, I had read them all.

I combed embassies, cultural centers, even hotel lobbies, but found only faded photocopies and technical handbooks. I was irritable and frustrated. Jack complained my withdrawal symptoms were driving him crazy, and would I please keep my hands off his schoolbooks.

And then I discovered the Green Bamboo.

A typical Asian backpacker cafe, the Green Bamboo in Hanoi offered soothing fruitshakes and banana pancakes. Backpackers lolled for days, writing postcards and reading. And before moving on, these international wanderers would sell the books they had read, now dead weight in their packs.

The Green Bamboo had a whole wall of used paperbacks, arranged on wooden shelves behind dirty glass doors - familiar books I was thrilled to reread, and new authors I discovered. And best of all, every week meant new backpackers and new books.

Every Sunday, I strolled down busy Hang Bong Street, past the camera shops and clothing stalls, the stationery stores and noodle restaurants. Ignoring the art galleries, the uniformed schoolchildren and the dance hall, I burst into the Green Bamboo, lured by the seductive call of books, more books, new books. The young Vietnamese who worked in the cafe would point out the latest acquisitions. When the books were too many to carry, I rode home by cyclo. Seated in the small rickshaw with my stack of books, the driver cycling behind, my happiness was complete.

A decade later, back in the Western world, it is easy for me to buy books. I can walk two blocks to the nearest bookstore, or order books online. But nothing is quite as exciting as hunting for treasure among the grimy bookshelves of the Green Bamboo. ¶

A native New Yorker, Raquelle Azran divides her time between Hanoi, Vietnam, where she specializes in Vietnamese contemporary fine art (www.artnet.com/razran.html) and Tel Aviv, Israel, where she writes in her inner city aerie overlooking the Mediterranean.

Azran has been widely published. Some of her accomplishments include her short story ‘By the Roadblock of Bethlehem’ which was awarded honorable mention and published in the International Herald Tribune literary supplement of the Middle East edition (2002). Her work has also appeared in publications such as The Writing Group Book (Chicago Review Press, 2003), Aunties:Thirty Five Writers Celebrate Their Other Mother (Ballantine Books, 2004), the Culture supplement of the Haaretz/International Herald Tribune, Yuan Yang, a Hong Kong based literary journal and the 2009 Tel Aviv Short Stories anthology.
Laura Margolis in the Spotlight
Portrait of a heroine in Shanghai
The story of Laura Margolis reads like an epic novel. She embodies what larger-than-life literary heroines are made of, though without embellishment, exaggeration, panache or hubris. She was the real thing. Yet despite this, to most, this remarkable and dignified woman remains unknown.

Imagine the scene: Japanese-occupied Shanghai. The city has been ravaged by war. Hardships and serious deprivations abound. Then add in the arrival of over 20,000 Jewish refugees desperate to escape the fate of their brethren in German Nazi occupied Europe. They arrive in the last free port in the world, seeking refuge. A lone American woman travels by boat determined to help as many of these refugees as possible to emigrate to America, as well as to assist in meeting the daily needs of all the Jewish refugees in the interim. After assisting in saving thousands of lives, often forced to rely on little more than her own tenacity, she is interned by the Japanese. Once her release is negotiated in a prisoner of war exchange, she is able to smuggle vital information out, hidden in her pants and written on toilet paper. Following an arduous sea voyage towards repatriation, she accepts another assignment in Europe, still in the throws of war where she flies in an American bomber over Nazi controlled Europe. She is issued an army uniform and given the rank of Colonel, so that she could fly back and forth over Europe to continue relief work. Ultimately, postwar, still in a field position, she finds her true love in Paris.

This is not from the dust jacket of an epic novel but rather the historical account of a most uncommon life.

To go back to the beginning, and conceptualize the willingness on the part of Laura Margolis to even accept the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s (JDC) assignment in Shanghai in 1941, at the insistence of the State Department, one almost has to suspend belief. She was to travel by ship, a long and arduous journey in wartime, to Shanghai, China. She would be traveling alone, something quite rare for a woman in those days and to a country where she did not speak the language. Even in peacetime, these factors would make this journey something out of the ordinary. But one can’t ignore the fact that she agreed to undertake this field position in the throws of war and in an occupied city. But Ms. Margolis was someone who focused on her mission and goals and, if necessary, shunned conventional fears. In her previous posting in Cuba, where she aided German Jewish refugees, she became the first female overseas representative for the JDC. On the back of this experience, she was thought to be the perfect candidate for this new, most difficult posting.

When she arrived in Shanghai in 1941, the scene was tumultuous, chaotic. The Jewish community was struggling to meet the
needs of the over 20,000 Jewish refugees that had poured into the city overnight. The JDC had been funneling money in for refugee aid to a local Jewish committee since 1939 but the task of attending to the needs of such a large number of people was seemingly insurmountable. A staggering 8,000 of the refugees, having fled Europe with little more than the clothes on their backs, were classified as destitute. She estimated that 12,000 of them were clustered in camps in the Hongkew district, living in makeshift barracks, improvised dwellings in buildings that had barely survived bombings. The JDC was providing not only food, but in many instances, clothing, housing medical care and education as well.

In a 1944 statement, she explained that, “Shanghai was totally unprepared to receive invading hoards. Shanghai was economically unable to absorb them...a very serious situation developed...Nothing permanent was ever constructed and nothing constructive was ever planned.” She explains, “If I hadn’t seen this myself, I could never have believed it.”

There were few economic opportunities in Shanghai due to the ordinary deprivations of living in an occupied city during wartime, coupled with the influx of refugees from all over the world in response to the city’s open door policy. The city had suffered considerable damage. Overcrowding was a reality and starvation and disease rampant.

Compounding the challenges Ms. Margolis faced, the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States’ subsequent entry into the war further complicated the situation. The JDC, as an American organization, was suddenly precluded from transferring funds into Shanghai as it was now in enemy territory. December 8, 1941 at 4:00 am Shanghai time (December 7 in the United States), the bombing on Pearl Harbor, was certainly a pivotal moment that further pushed the limits of the human spirit.

That same day, as America was being bombed, Ms. Margolis recounts seeing ships in Shanghai’s harbor on fire and hearing that the Japanese were crossing the bridge into the heart of the city. While many were thrown into a state of panicked frenzy, Ms. Margolis maintained her acumen and she and Manny Siegel, who had arrived just days before at her insistence to help with the operation, began shredding the carbon copies of their communications and records they had kept. Realizing the potential damage their reports could cause for them now in an enemy occupied city, they flushed the evidence down their hotel toilet.

Her leadership was truly tested, in January 1942, when it became clear that the available funds would be insufficient to feed the 8,000 refugees even the meager one bowl of stew they were being provided. She was forced to make the very difficult decision to temporarily only offer food to 4,000 of the 8,000, saving these portions for children, the elderly and the
sick, in other words, the most vulnerable among the population. (An interesting contrast to Germany’s treatment of its most vulnerable during the war.)

In another incident, countlessly recalled in interviews and organizational records, Ms. Margolis approached a Japanese official and requested assistance, describing the dire situation in the Hongkew ghetto. To her surprise, he acquiesced under the condition that she, along with the assistance of Siegel, take charge of the operation. An order of business was to reconstruct the soup kitchens in order to increase capacity. She used her complex network to discover that two new boilers had been delivered to the Sassoon Company just before the attack on Pearl Harbor and they were not put to use. With Japanese support, she requisitioned two large boilers to be fitted into a new planned soup kitchen as the old kitchen was not operable because it relied on old and ill-fitted Chinese equipment whose fuel requirements were too expensive to meet. This proved vital in the continued delivery of nutritious meals to the refugees; the capacity was increased to be able to provide for meals for well over 10,000 refugees daily. She also continued to help provide them with medical aid, economic aid, vocational training and schooling.

In addition to daily deprivations, the real threat of eventual internment in a Japanese camp as an enemy alien always hung over them. When her own inevitable internment occurred, in February 1943, she was sustained by her fortitude but furthermore she was able to excel in extremely difficult circumstances, marked by Japanese austerity, and maintain her tenacious approach. Though healthy, she was able to feign illness and get herself in a hospital and away from the inherent dangers in camp life.

Prior to their internment, she and Mr. Siegel had the foresight to develop what they named the Bitker Committee, essentially giving Mr. Bitker, a member of the existing pre-war Russian Jewish community of Shanghai, power of attorney to ensure that all aid would continue should something happen to herself and Mr. Siegel.

Once it was imminent that her release was secured, she was able to arrange a meeting with Bitker in order to obtain an up to date account of the financial situation of the relief project so she could report back to the JDC. Recognizing that prior to repatriation, she would be subject to a body search by her Japanese captors, she wrote the entire record on toilet paper and hid it in her undergarments to ensure they would not be detected.

Despite these most extraordinary events and the remarkable qualities she possessed, Laura Margolis maintained humility and even a sense of humor. In her United States Holocaust
Memorial Museum (USHM) July 1990 interview, she joked that when asked why she took these roles on and why she was willing to travel the world, her response was that she was obviously in search of a husband. (She did eventually find her husband in France, Marc Jarblum, and married in 1950 at the age of 47.)

When reflecting on her wartime activities, in that USHM interview, at the age of 87, she stated, “I wish I were 10, 15 years younger. Not much more. Because I find the world so interesting. I find what’s happening now in the world very exciting. I can’t be a part of it anymore. I can only be platonic. I’m a voracious reader. I think since I’m back I’ve enjoyed the pleasure of catching up on my love for history, and understanding so many things that I never understood before when I was in action.” She never lost perspective or focus.

The JDC’s comprehensive historic archive carefully detailing the plight of the refugees in Shanghai noticeably contains only a scintilla of photographic proof of the role Ms. Margolis played. Though she was larger-than-life and her bravery, deftness and persistence are rightfully credited with saving thousands of lives, she seemed in photos content with remaining out of the spotlight. Perhaps this is the mark of a true hero. ☞

Note: Laura Margolis Jarblum died September 9, 1997. A plaque in the JDC headquarters serves as a daily reminder of her incredible accomplishments.

All photographs are courtesy of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

About the JDC

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) is the world’s leading Jewish humanitarian assistance organization. JDC works in more than 70 countries and in Israel to alleviate hunger and hardship, rescue Jews in danger, create lasting connections to Jewish life, and provide immediate relief and long-term development support for victims of natural and man-made disasters. To learn more, visit www.JDC.org.

For more information about JDC’s programs in Asia, please contact Judy Amit at JudyA@jdc.org.il.
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The Beauty of Tradition

Photo credit: Yoraan Rafael Reuben
Mehendi in full color

Photo credit: Yoraan Rafael Reuben
Though much of the Bene Israel community no longer lives in India and have moved, en masse, to their ancestral homeland of Israel, they have carried with them many of the rich and colorful traditions they developed in their nearly 2,000-year history on the Indian-subcontinent. While still in India, they celebrated a peaceful coexistence with their neighbors and though they retained their separate Jewish identity, many local traditions were incorporated into their daily practice.

The henna and mehendi ceremony is a very important part of the Bene Israel pre-wedding tradition with long standing roots.

Mehendi is the application of henna as a temporary form of skin decoration. It is an ancient Indian tradition, still very much alive in traditional Indian communities worldwide. In the Jewish world, this custom is specific to the practices of the Bene Israel which differ from similar practices that developed in other Jewish communities.

In contemporary practice, the application of mehendi is to the bride's hands. Even though the menendi to be applied is sometimes made by a professionally trained henna artist, it is often a relative however who still applies the mehendi to the bride's hands.

Traditionally, the application of the mehendi used for the outline of the design is done the night before the henna itself is applied, though the index finger would be purposefully kept blank. The application is characterized by elaborate and beautiful intricately patterned designs. The following day around mid-day, the henna is applied, followed by the application of the mehendi on the index fingers of the bride and the bridegroom. The henna, in addition to making the skin glow, is also attributed with medicinal properties. This ceremony typically takes place at home but contemporary communities sometimes move the ceremony to catering halls or other more public spaces.

Traditionally, three days before the marriage, the bride and groom are not allowed to leave the house and are not allowed to even see each other until the arrival of the chosen auspicious day for these ceremonies.

Following the henna and the mehendi ceremony the ritual Malida ceremony takes place.

The Bene Israel, one of the major groups of Indian Jews, date their presence in India to their arrival on the Konkan Coast 2,000 years. They mingled and often adopted customs and traditions from both their neighboring Hindu and Muslim communities.

As the pictures in this photo essay beautifully illustrate, the Bene Israel are steeped in unique tradition, and their rituals are alive and in full color.

About the photographer: Yoraan Rafael Reuben was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India. He currently lives in Givataim, Israel where he works for El Al though he is also a photographer “by hobby, profession and passion.” And he notes that he is “passioned by the lens.”

You can contact Yoraan through his Webpage: www.yoraanrafael.com or via email: yoraan@yahoo.com
A Strange Foreign Import

Jewish Studies in China

by Steve Hochstadt

Steve Hochstadt and Pan Guang at the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai
All over China, the Torah is studied and the Holocaust is taught. Never before has interest in Jews, Jewish culture and Jewish history been so widespread in the world’s most populous nation.

Jews have lived in China for nearly 1000 years. Well before European Christians discovered the Middle Kingdom, Jewish traders from western Asia had settled in Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty, and perhaps the largest city in the world in the 12th century. The small Kaifeng Jewish community survived floods and wars, but was gradually absorbed into Chinese culture. By the 19th century, there was no longer a synagogue and the descendants had lost their Jewish identity, although they still practiced some customs unusual in China, such as avoiding pork. Only a few recalled their long history.

Since the late 19th century, waves of Jews again entered China. After the Opium Wars of the 1840s, Jews of Baghdadi origin accompanied British colonists into Shanghai. Around 1900, a few thousand Russian Jews escaped Tsarist persecution, settling in Harbin, Tianjin, and Shanghai. More followed in the wake of the 1917 Revolution and later Stalinist anti-Semitism. By the 1930s, about 5000 Jews lived in Shanghai, and perhaps another 10,000 in Harbin and elsewhere in China. Then in little less than one year, from late 1938 until September 1939, 16,000 Central European Jews fleeing the Nazis flooded into Shanghai.

Like the Jews themselves, anti-Semitism was a strange foreign import to China. Educated Chinese admired Jewish love for learning, commercial success, and respect for family. Even when the Japanese military took over Shanghai in the wake of Pearl Harbor, Jewish life was never threatened. The Japanese, too, brought into China a traditionally high regard for Jews.

After the Japanese were defeated in 1945, Chinese began to express hostility to the foreigners who had dominated their ports for over a century. Nearly all the Jews in China left within five years, scattering across the globe in the US, Israel, Australia, Europe, and Latin America, while a few stayed close in Hong Kong. Although Israel was one of the first nations to recognize the People’s Republic of China, Chinese support of the Muslim nations of the Middle East led to a breakdown in relations with Israel.

By 1978, after Mao’s death, the government initiated far-reaching economic and political changes, now officially referred to as the period of “reform and opening up”. One door that was reopened in the 1980s was to Jews: the Jewish past in China and the Jewish present, represented by Israel, became subjects of discussion. First military, then economic, and finally diplomatic ties between China and Israel evolved, until formal relations between the two were announced in 1992. Communities of Jewish foreigners reappeared in Shanghai and developed in Beijing.

Jews again became a subject for academic study. Some scholars followed traditional Communist ideological lines: one of the first publications about Jews in China was Xu Zhucheng’s biographical condemnation of Silas Hardoon as a foreign bourgeois exploiter. Others, like Xu Buzeng in Shanghai, after years of research, published more sympathetic articles on the Shanghai refugees. His translation of the standard work on Shanghai’s Jewish refugees by David Kranzler was published in 1990.

At the same time, an institutional structure for Jewish studies was being created. The Shanghai Judaic Studies Association (SJSA) was founded in August 1988, with a Constitution printed in English. One of its purposes was to establish an academic research center, and soon the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai became the first institution in China devoted to studying Jews. From the outset, studying Jews in China was linked to trading with Jews outside of China. Among the “Academic Activities” listed in the Constitution was the “establishment of economic cooperation between Chinese and foreign industrial and business enterprises”.

Another step was the first official return of former Shanghai Jews, when a small group arranged for the first public Seder celebration in Shanghai in April, 1989. The Chinese government rolled out the red carpet, offering Mao’s former residence as lodging. The Jewish visitors met the scholars of the newly formed SJSA; Jin Ying-zhong, the Secretary-General, proclaimed: “We all are Shanghailander.” Xu Buzeng, already in his 60s, presented an overview of Jewish cultural figures in Shanghai, his special passion.

At a 1992 conference at Harvard University on “Jewish Diasporas in China”, a younger generation of scholarly leaders appeared. Their ability to speak English allowed them to connect Chinese scholarship to Jews across the world. Xu Xin from Nanjing University talked about the development of Jewish studies in China. Pan Guang, formerly one of 4 Vice-Chairmen of the SJSA, now the Dean of the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai, addressed Zionism within the Shanghai Jewish community.

Since then, Pan Guang and Xu Xin have become the leading figures in Chinese Jewish studies. Working closely with the municipal government, Pan Guang organized China’s first Jewish studies conference in Shanghai in April 1994. Along with the usual scholarly papers, a monument commemorating the Central European refugees was unveiled in Huoshan Park, formerly Wayside Park, in the center of refugee settlement in the 1940s. At the dedication ceremony, Jewish speakers stressed the past: the survival of thousands of endangered
Jews in Shanghai and the hospitality of the Chinese to these desperate foreigners. Chinese speakers looked to a prosperous future, based on improving relations between Jews and Chinese.

Pan Guang has been remarkably successful in forging international relationships around the Shanghai Jewish experience. He was the lone Chinese scholar at a Salzburg conference on “Flight to Shanghai”, organized by the Austrian Gedenkdienst (Holocaust Memorial Service) in May 1995. The Gedenkdienst, created in 1992 for Austrians with academic and historical interests who seek an alternative to military service, now regularly sends volunteers to his Shanghai Center. In 2006 Pan Guang became the first winner of the Gedenkdienst’s Austrian Holocaust Memorial Award.

Xu Xin has followed a slightly different path. In 1992 he founded the Institute of Jewish Studies at Nanjing University as a training ground for future generations of Chinese teachers and scholars. Since then Professor Xu Xin has single-handedly made Jewish studies into a significant subject in Chinese universities. He is a prolific scholar, writing about many Jewish historical and religious subjects in Chinese and English. He has raised a million dollars to support the Institute, which now has spacious offices in a new building on the Nanjing campus. The biggest contributor has been the Diane and Guiford Glazer Foundation in Los Angeles, after whom the Institute is named, but Xu Xin has also given lectures across the US, collecting hundreds of smaller contributions. His students lead Jewish studies at other universities.

The career of another pioneer of Jewish studies exemplifies how much has changed in the past 20 years. Zhang Qianhong’s interest in the Holocaust was awakened as a student by the Diary of Anne Frank in Chinese translation. Finding few other books about Jews, she went to the library at Beijing University, where a librarian said, “Here are many books, but nobody looks at them.” After post-doctoral study in Israel, she founded an Institute of Jewish Studies at Henan University in 2002. When she sent an article about the concentration camps, based on the work of Raul Hilberg, to a magazine editor in Beijing, he asked her if Hilberg’s book was a novel. That article was one of the first in a Chinese magazine about the Holocaust.

Her student, Zhang Ligang, represents the next generation of Chinese scholars of Jewish history. He received a PhD from Xu Xin at Nanjing University and returned to Henan University. When Zhang Qianhong became Vice President of Zhengzhou University, he became the director of Jewish studies at Henan. Newer Jewish studies programs have sprung up, such as the Center of Judaic and Chinese Studies at Sichuan International Studies University, under the direction of Professor Fu Xiaowei, and the Center for Judaic and Inter-Religious Studies at Shandong University.

The history of Jews in China provides edifying narratives for the Chinese. While Christians in medieval Europe were preaching that Jews were children of the Devil, massacring them during the Crusades, and expelling them from their countries, a Jewish community found a home in Kaifeng. When Europeans once again began wholesale killing of Jews in Russia and then everywhere else in the 20th century, tens of thousands of refugees found unique safety in China.

Alongside a national academic Jewish studies program that would rival any European nation’s, the Chinese government has encouraged the development of a more public form of Jewish studies. In the restored Ohel Moshe Synagogue in Shanghai, the Jewish Refugees Museum, under the direction of Chen Jian, presents a unique exhibition of photos, artifacts, and films about the Central European refugees, the only group of former foreign residents to have its own museum. A similar exhibit featuring the history and culture of the Jews is also located in a rebuilt synagogue in Harbin. The Sino-Israel Research and Study Center was established there in 2002 at Heilongjiang University.

The story of the refugees is useful to other nations, too. Germany and Austria seek opportunities to display their historical responsibility. The German Consulate General in Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees Museum collaboratively created an exhibition and public program around the stories of former German-speaking refugees, timed to coincide with World Expo 2010. “Remembering the Past and Creating a New Future,”

Feature by Steve Hochstadt
expresses the major motivations of the partners. The Germans are determined to remember and the Chinese are ambitiously shaping the future, notably in Shanghai.

In the Chinese academy, historical Jews have become an interesting and useful subject. The decline and disappearance of these communities makes their study amenable to positive interpretations. But there has also been a surprising internal revival of the Chinese Jewish community in Kaifeng. In 2009-10, Eric Rothberg, a young Jewish man from Minnesota studying at Henan University, taught a weekly class of Chinese how Jews around the world celebrate the Sabbath. Unlike the Jewish studies classes in universities, these citizens are making a personal journey into their families’ past. Although by traditional Jewish matrilineal laws, they would not be recognized as Jews, they wear their identity as Jews proudly. In Teaching the Torah Lane, Guo Yan has hung a banner with menorah and large Star of David advertising the Kaifeng Jewish History Memorial Center, a small room displaying photographs and artifacts. Above the Li family’s front door hangs a banner that says “A House for Jewish People”. But their meetings for prayer are strictly private as Judaism is not one of the five officially recognized religions of China.

There is still a deep divide between academic and personal Judaic studies in China but I believe that the two forms of Jewish studies will eventually mingle much more freely. Jewish studies itself has become much more worldly and diverse. Lihong Song, a young scholar at Nanjing University, wrote that “the locus classicus of all Chinese Jewish studies is the Jewish diaspora in China.” His research on Jewish identity in the Roman world represents a broadened definition of Jewish studies. In Henan University’s Institute of Jewish Studies, where the older faculty focus on the Kaifeng Jews, Hu Hao studies modern themes: the beliefs of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, about Judaism as a community.

Last year Pan Guang organized the First Young Scholars Forum on Jewish Studies, at which 22 academics from 12 cities presented papers, only one of which was about Jews in China. The MA thesis topics of Nanking University students cover the whole range of Jewish studies, from the Torah to Jews in medieval England to the development of Zionism to the Israeli-Arab conflict. As Jewish studies has expanded beyond the researches of a small group of scholars into public spaces in China, especially the university classroom, its scope has been broadened to cover the world. Henan University’s annual essay competition, supported by Len Hew, a Chinese Canadian, has awarded prizes and scholarships to 200 students since 2003, based on the most varied essays about Jews. Lihong Song’s course on Jewish civilization attracts 400 students each year.

In 2000, Xu Xin published “Some Thoughts on Our Policy Toward the Jewish Religion - including a Discussion of Our Policy Toward the Kaifeng Jews,” in Points East, the newsletter of the Sino-Judaic Institute, a non-profit organization which supports nearly all of the Chinese programs discussed above. He argued that the Chinese government should accord Judaism recognition as a Chinese religion, as it does with Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Although the government has not yet accepted this idea, it has been more accommodating to foreign Jews who wish to have religious services in China. A year ago, the first ever bat mitzvah was held in the Ohel Moshe Synagogue. During World Expo 2010, the Ohel Rachel Synagogue in Shanghai’s former French Concession was opened to Jewish worship, also for foreigners.

This is another step in the ever-widening tolerance for Judaism, which has followed in the wake of the opening toward Jewish studies. That appears to me to be the consensus of students, academics, university administrators and official central government policy. I too expect this process to continue. ✪

Steve Hochstadt is Professor of History at Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, and treasurer of the Sino-Judaic Institute. He has written extensively about the Holocaust and the Shanghai Jewish refugees, and his oral history, Exodus to Shanghai, will be published in 2012 by Palgrave Macmillan.
City on the Sea: Timeless novels about 1930s Shanghai

Writing saved Vicki Baum’s life. A mother of three, Baum started writing in her native Vienna at night after her children went to bed. She rose to fame in German-speaking Europe in the late 1920s as a popular novelist and romance writer. But it was her 1931 novel Grand Hotel that catapulted Baum to international fame and thus changed the course of her life and that of her family.

After Grand Hotel was adapted to the stage in London and New York, Baum traveled to the United States on a two-week trip in 1931 and fell in love with the country, she brought her family over to settle in California. It was from her new home in Los Angeles and her successful Hollywood writing career that allowed her to sail across the Pacific to Shanghai in 1937, which resulted in her next epic novel, Shanghai ‘37 (Doubleday, 1939).

Shanghai ‘37 is a straightforward, thorough look into the lives of nine people who perished in a bombing at the fictional Shanghai Hotel, fashioned after the Cathay, or present-day Peace Hotel, including its grand lobby and alluring rooftop bar.

The first part of Shanghai ‘37 presented the early years of each of the nine characters, which include a fictionalized Tu Yueh-sheng*, the notorious gangster; his American-trained doctor son; a coolie named Lung Yen; a young American couple; a German-Jewish refugee; a young German pianist refugee; a White Russian who passed herself off as a British aristocrat; and a Japanese journalist.

Baum frequently incorporated the idiom, better a dog in peace than a man in war, into her story. This theme is present throughout the book, especially in the second part, in which each character found misfortune on the eve of the Japanese invasion.

For someone who only spent a year in Shanghai, Baum had an incredible knack for understanding the many layers of the decadent and desperate Shanghai society the year before the war reached the City on the Sea. She clearly comprehended Chinese culture, British customs, American naivety, and the desperate plight of her fellow German-Jews once Hitler descended upon Europe.

American writer Emily Hahn could be a character in Shanghai ‘37, but instead was the protagonist in her own memoir from the same era, China to Me (Country Life Press, 1944). Hahn, with her sister, sailed to China in the mid 1930s for vacation. When the pair arrived in Shanghai, Hahn was so taken with the city that she remained—for years—while her sister traveled north and later returned to the US.

Like Baum, Hahn hung out on the rooftop bar of the Cathay Hotel. While she mentioned famous writers and other personalities she met at the Cathay, Emily Hahn never wrote about meeting Vicki Baum. She did, however, become close to Victor Sassoon, a prominent Jewish Iraqi businessman, and was a frequent guest of his at the racetrack.

During Hahn’s years in Shanghai (from the mid-to-late 1930s), she lived according to her own rules. Besides renting a flat in the red light district and dating a married Chinese man, she owned a monkey named Mr. Mills and brought him—dressed in a diaper—with her wherever she went in Shanghai.

Hahn left Shanghai for a three-month trip to Hong Kong for a research trip while she was working on the Soong sisters’ biography. But the war got in the way and Emily Hahn was never able to return to Shanghai. She’d earlier met the acquaintance of Charles Boxer, the head of British Intelligence in Hong Kong, and became intimately reacquainted with him on her extended Hong Kong stay. The two would have a daughter together before they married in 1945.

While Vicki Baum’s Jewish background was manifested in her character, Dr. Hain, Emily Hahn didn’t write explicitly about her Judaism, except for her close relationship with Victor Sassoon and how, through him, she became involved in the plight of the German Jewish refugees who fled to Shanghai in the late 1930s.

But Hahn never compared herself to these refugees, even though her family was of German-Jewish descent. At one point she even wrote that there were too many of these refugees. However, when she described the tensions between the White Russians and the German Jews, she clearly demonstrated that her sympathy rested with the latter.

Other references to her Judaism included a conversation in Chungking, while Hahn was working on her biography of the Soong sisters, with an American missionary couple. On page 129, when Hahn and the missionaries discussed God and extramarital affairs, she said to them, “...do you think that is the sort of thing your sort of person ought to say to my sort?” Not only was Hahn referring to her married Chinese boyfriend, but also to her religious difference.

As both Shanghai ‘37 and China to Me show, writers Vicki Baum and Emily Hahn lived unconventional lives for women of that time. As Jewish writers, they braved the turbulent waters of a brewing world war and educated their readers about Shanghai at the end of an era we’ve never seen again.

* We use the Wade-Giles spelling to stay true to the fashion of 1930s Shanghai.
Here and Now

A Jewish understanding of Buddhist teaching

Having now lived in Hong Kong for a bit over 5 years, I’ve been exposed to new foods and sites, friends and colleagues, opportunities and experiences. Of all the new things that I’ve learned from being in Hong Kong and touring around Asia, the most notable is an appreciation for philosophies and practices that, although I was aware of their existence before, I have only recently begun to more fully understand and explore them. In particular, I have been moved by what I have learned about mindfulness practices as derived from Buddhism.

Now, Jews being interested in Buddhism is nothing new. Books like That’s Funny, You Don’t Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist or The Jew and the Lotus: A Poet’s Re-Discovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India have been around for many years. It’s only through living here and investigating these practices that I have come to see that we do not need an integration of Buddhism and Judaism to get the best of both, because in fact the mindfulness practices that so many admire about Buddhism are already a part of Judaism.

Rabbi Arthur Green in These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life writes in his introduction that the interface with Buddhism and Judaism has reawakened a need to rediscover certain practices in Judaism that many of us don’t associate with Judaism, even though they have been there all along. For me, mindfulness practices do not
set up an obstacle or tension to Jewish practice, but rather serves as a mirror to reflect back those aspects of Judaism that are sometimes obscured. Although many people tend to think of Judaism as food and holidays or rituals and outdated commandments, at its core, everything we are commanded to do—are all of the mitzvot—are designed for the purpose of increasing our awareness of God and fueling that into self-development, improved relationships, and enhanced communities.

Although my work at an integrated body-mind-spirit practice and research center has reinforced the importance of mindfulness practices, last year I was fortunate to attend a one-day training and then a lecture by the renowned Buddhist Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. His constant message was that for each of us, at every moment, happiness is here and now. I should be clear that in Buddhism, happiness is a general state of compassion and freedom from suffering, rather than a momentary episode of elation or pleasure. According to the teacher when it comes to happiness, we don’t need to search for it, pay for it, will for it—we only need to be open and aware of the present moment. The meditations and practices that he recommended were all meant for one purpose, to cultivate the mind to this state of awareness to increase our contentment in daily living and as a guide when we encounter painful circumstances. Be aware. Be present. Be open to the moment.

Hearing a common truth as I listened to him, I found my mind searching to connect his teaching with Jewish practices. As an example of Jewish mindfulness practice, in the morning we appreciate another day in reciting Modeh ani, the daily acknowledgement of gratitude for life. The blessings that follow turn our attention to the functioning of our bodies, the Divine inside of all of us in the form of our soul, and the ability to comprehend by studying a passage of Torah. On erev Shabbat, L’cha Dodi calls our attention to the presence of Shabbat and Kiddush focuses us on present moment Shabbat joy. Reflecting on these and other practices was a great reminder that rituals and prayers are not archaic ways of pleasing a God who can be easily angered, but as a way to cultivate a practice of presence and awareness. And for what purpose is this awareness? Pure and simple attention to the moment, which in Judaism is simultaneous with attention to God, because this awareness prepares us to appreciate life, treat others well, serve our community, and engage in tikun olam (repair of the world). It’s unfortunate that many of us have forgotten or have not been let in on this aspect of Judaism.

The constant refrain of here and now, brought to mind a phrase from Jewish liturgy that rings with the same sounds. Hineni. Sometimes translated as, “I am ready,” it is also translated as “Here I am.” More than announcing one’s availability or presence, hineni takes on a weighty meaning that implies present moment awareness and intense engagement. This isn’t what someone would answer when a teacher announces role call. In that case a simple “Ani po” or “I am here” would suffice. Rather than announce physical presence—“I am here”—hineni is a declaration of spiritual presence, “Here I am”.

This definition is heightened when we consider some of the contexts in which hineni occurs. Just in the book of Bereshit (Genesis), hineni is offered four times in a response to a call from God (22.1, 22.11, 31.11, 46.2). The other time are in response to another person such as Abraham responding when Isaac asks what they will sacrifice on Mt. Moriah (22.7), Esau answering Isaac when called for his blessing (27.1) and then Isaac responding to Jacob when he comes disguised as Esau (27.18), thereby receiving his father’s blessing. All of these moments are spiritually heavy and during recognizable moments of importance.

There is one more occurrence of hineni in Bereshit that teaches us a lesson that parallels the lessons of cultivating mindfulness in our every day lives. When Jacob summons Joseph to find his brothers in Shechem, the favored son does not just go or simply answer in the affirmative. Joseph responds, “Hineni” (37.13). Even though this utterance of hineni, is in response to a seemingly simple utilitarian task, for me it offers an important teaching on mindfulness in Judaism.

Knowing how the story progresses with Joseph’s ultimate rise to serving as vizier
of Egypt, it is easy to see this example of hineni as spiritually important. Neither of them knew what that exact moment would lead to; otherwise how do we explain their individual anguish in the years between this moment and their reunion in Egypt? This is exactly why I think it is a powerful lesson and one that can be said to illustrate the teaching by Thich Nhat Hanh. The fact that Joseph stated his readiness and presence in a non-obvious spiritual situation speaks to the benefits of mindfulness in our regular lives. It is in some ways easy to be attentive in the midst of a solemn occasion. It is less so in normal times, but these are the moments when a state of mindfulness is so important.

By answering, hineni Joseph was signaling that he was present and ready for whatever would come—no matter how ordinary or extraordinary. Later when we read that Joseph is successful in Egypt, it’s only after we read that “Adonai was with him,” that is, present in his life (39:2). He was aware of God and this awareness made him fortunate. In Joseph’s case, being fully aware of God’s presence had financial reward, but more importantly it allowed him to make the difficult ethical choices when approached by his master’s wife, maintain hopeful humility when imprisoned, and replace hatred and bitterness towards his brothers with forgiveness and mercy. This is exactly what the teachings of mindfulness are meant to help us with; that is, it slows us down and increases our compassion to masterfully handle whatever comes our way. For Joseph, like many of us, God does not talk with us directly in obvious ways. And so, for Joseph as well as for us, hineni is a call to the present moment, which keeps us centered in our lives, sustains our relationship with others and God, and nurtures our ability to cope with adversity.

When I practice mindfulness and bring such strategies into working with clients, I am always amazed how distress dissipates and happiness increases. In some ways it took me living in Asia to fully comprehend that there is no need to infuse Judaism with practices from the East. Only now have I been able to appreciate what has always been here.

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The Malida Ceremony
The Core of the Bene Israel Tradition

The Malida Ceremony is at the core of the Bene Israel Jewish Indian community’s life cycle rituals and identity. The dish of sweetened, moistened, parched and flattened rice (Poha/Pohe in Hindi/Marathi*), prayed over and served at the ceremony, is also coincidentally called Malida. The sweetened and flattened rice, mixed with coconut flakes, flavored and scented with cardamom, and garnished with almonds and pistachios is served on a large Thali (large round Indian stainless steel dish) and adorned with five fruits. Traditionally, the fruits are a banana, an orange, an apple, a date, and a pear, although it could be any other in season fruit. Some use seven fruits. The heaping thali is then decorated with roses or rose petals and depending on the lifecycle and the day of the week, it might be decorated with cloves (besamim/aromatic spices) and served at the ceremony. A handful of Malida along with sliced fruit and a date are then disbursed to all guests after the blessings.

The Bene Israel Indian Jews, called Shanwar Teli, which means oil pressers, are one of five distinct Indian Jewish communities (Cochini, Bene Israel, Baghdadi, Bnei Menashe and Bene Ephraim). Today there are approximately 60,000 Bene Israel living in Israel and a few thousand still living in India. The Malida ceremony is also called the Eliyahu HaNavi ceremony as the prophet Elijah is considered the guardian prophet of the Bene Israel community. Legend has it that he rescued the handful of Jews who escaped after the destruction of the Second Temple (70CE) in Jerusalem and were shipwrecked and washed ashore on the Konkan Coast in the State of Maharashtra, just south of Mumbai (Bombay). The Eliyahu Hanavi melody is sung from a transliterated siddur (Hebrew words written in Hindi/Marathi characters) and blessings over the fruit from the tree (HaEtz) and from the earth (HaAretz) are recited during the ceremony.

There are few accounts on the origin of the Malida dish and custom. Some say the custom predates to the time of the First Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The Israelites would bring parched and flattened wheat grains as an offering to God at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Malida is an adaptation with a local ingredient, the Poha, parched and flattened rice.

Many in India are familiar with widespread savory versions of Poha. Versions of this sweet (poha) Malida, mixed with wheat and semolina and made into bread, are popular in Southern India. The Bene Israel’s neighboring Muslims served it at weddings, engagement parties, ceremonies and feasts. Unlike their neighbors, the Bene Israel’s version is more of a flaky cereal without wheat and semolina, and they do not add milk or ghee (clarified butter) to this dish. This keeps it parve, as after the Malida ceremony, a non-vegetarian Indian meal is served of chicken or Mutton, out of respect to their Hindu neighbors and the sanctity of the cow. The Malida is served and celebrated during many happy occasions such as wedding henna ceremonies, engagement parties, housewarming parties and when blessings for bon voyage, safety or good health are wished upon. The Malida offering might have further similarities to the Hindu tradition of bringing offering to their deities at their temples as the Jews brought offerings during the time of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem.

Lo Mein to Laksa
by Shulie Madnick
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Malida – Sweetened Poha

Ingredients:
4 cups Poha
1/2 cup sugar
1/2 cup unsweetened coconut flakes
5-10 cardamom pods, shelled and ground
Handful golden raisins (optional)
5 of each: apples, bananas, oranges, dates and pears

Garnish:
Handful raw almonds, blanched, peeled and sliced (optional).
Handful raw pistachios, shelled, blanched, peeled and sliced (optional)
Or handful each of crushed roasted almonds and crushed roasted pistachios
Rose petals

Note:
I make the dish at home and serve it at tastings, without nuts, and everyone loves it. I have Malida for breakfast or as a lightly sweetened dessert along my afternoon tea. Also keep in mind these are suggested measurements. If you like it sweeter, add sugar. Feel free to adjust measurements to your taste.

Directions:
1. Immerse Poha in cold water for four minutes until softens. Keep in mind some like it al dente, crunchy, I don’t! Be sure not to over soak them as they will turn mushy and the flakes will lose their silhouette.
2. Run through a sieve to drain all water out and press on top lightly to rid of excess water.
3. In a large bowl, add the drained Poha and sugar, and flake with a fork or your fingers to fluff the mixture.
4. Important: Add the sugar immediately so it will blend in smoothly and not remain grainy.
5. Add the cardamom and coconut and raisins (raisins are optional) and mix well.
6. Note: I only use my hands or a fork to keep the integrity of the shape of the flake and mix lightly.
7. Garnish with nuts.
8. Keep refrigerated until serving. Can keep in refrigerator for a few days.

Shulie Madnick is an Israeli born Bene Israeli Indian recipe developer, food and cultural writer and a food photographer. She had her recipes and photos published at The Washington Post, Fine Cooking Magazine, Washington Jewish Week, Whisk Magazine, among other publications. You can contact her through her site www.foodwanderings.blogspot.com.
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