When Past and Present Collide
Reshaping the future of the historic Shanghai Ghetto

From Kaifeng to the Kotel
A Chinese rabbi in the making

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Dear Editor

Hi! This is Sinora from India. I received your Issue 6 (June 2011). It was very, very informative. It was a pleasure to read. However, I just wish to ask if you could add even more information on Indian Jews.

In India, we have many synagogues whose information you can incorporate and there are many good personalities who can be of help for this magazine too.

I liked your numbering of issues. Wishing you all success for such a wonderful magazine. Good Work. Keep it up.

Sincerely yours
SINORA YEHEAL KOLATKAR

Dear Sinora:

Many thanks and we are always looking for new ideas and stories. Please feel free to send in specific story ideas or stories of your own. We love reader generated content and always welcome new submissions.

Kind regards,
Erica Lyons

Dear Editor,

I suggest to even further expand your articles and coverage, you should consider the Central Asian Jewish communities and their past history, particularly that of Bukhara Jews of Uzbekistan who served as ministers and doctors beginning in the Middle Ages through the establishment of the USSR. Many were also famous musicians, composers and artists.

Prof. Budnik
Tel Aviv

Dear Professor Budnik:

Thanks for the suggestion. We have not focused on that area yet but are definitely open to submissions. Thanks for the interest.

Kind regards,
Erica Lyons

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Kosher Israeli falafel in Guangzhou, China
Dear Readers:

Shana Tova Umetukah! Much has happened in the months since the last issue. As anticipated in our last issue, over the summer I participated in the Schusterman Foundation’s ROI Summit where I met incredible people engaged in Tikkan Olam work worldwide. Though in the Far East, we as Jews often are removed from the major arteries of Jewish life but at ROI, Asia was certainly a hot topic. At the summit, Caylee Talpert and Michalya Schonwald Moss discussed their experiences as volunteers in Nepal for Tevel b’Tzedek, while Ira Merzlykh introduced her vision for /clean.in/ a project that will invite Israelis to become eco-volunteers and eco-educators in India. I was also connected with Diarna, which works to preserve access to endangered sites and Jewish history using photographs, video, database technology and digital mapping. Additionally, I met those who work to create contemporary Jewish community, even in the Far East, like Moishe House that includes Moishe House Beijing in their network.

And this issue takes us another whirlwind tour throughout the region. We start with China, taking you to Kaifeng and then to the Kotel to meet Yaakov Wang in Michael Freund’s article From Kaifeng to the Kotel: A Chinese rabbi in the making. Also out of China, we bring you Susan Blumberg-Kason’s interview with Daniel Asa Rose about his book, Larry’s Kidney: Being the True Story of How I Found Myself in China with My Black Sheep Cousin and His Mail-Order Bride, Skirting the Law to Get Him a Transplant—and Save His Life. And yes, that is really the title – not an excerpt. When I first heard about Larry’s Kidney, I immediately purchased it on my Kindle on a Sunday morning. It’s an absolutely hysterical adventure, sprinkled with commentary and keen observations. By that evening, still unable to put the book down, I knew AJL had to sit down with Rose to hear more.

Also from China, we bring you a very unique perspective in Jocelyn Eikenburg’s piece Chosen Women Choosing Chinese Men - A tradition of love? Eikenburg is not Jewish (even though her name does end in ‘burg), but she explores the question, are Jewish women more likely to find love with Chinese men than their non-Jewish counterparts?

For another unique perspective, Thoufeek Zakriya, a Muslim from Cochin, India, explains how he became a Hebrew calligrapher in The Hebrew Calligrapher of Cochin: An Indian Muslim’s love for language.

Also from India, in our Writer’s Desk section, author Sophie Judah shares her fictional story, Customs with us. Customs is the extremely moving tale about a Bene Israel woman and the sometimes harsh realities of living in a world where personal choice is strictly limited by communal and familial custom.

Another creative writer, Eliyahu Enríquez, shares his poetry again with us. Enríquez, a Jewish-Filipino lover of words and spirituality, was also featured in AJL’s Summer 2010 issue. His work is highly emotional and complex. Please take the time to explore what he has to say.

This issue then takes you to Japan where our Best of Asian Jewish Life feature takes a look at the continuing aid that IsraAid is providing in the aftermath of the quake and tsunami. IsraAid has been involved in humanitarian aid projects around the region, though Japan is their current focus in the Far East.

We also hear from Akira Ohiso, a Jewish-Japanese American. We take a close look at his work, Surviving, produced by Akira and his wife Ellie, is a beautiful collection of art, language, correspondence, vignettes and photographs that chronicle his conversion. The reader/viewer steps into his heart and feels what it is like to be a Jew-by-choice. Last stop before the New Year is Cambodia. AJL Books Editor, Susan Blumberg-Kason, reviews two very different books that bring together Jews that narrowly escaped the Holocaust with Cambodians who narrowly escaped the Khmer Rouge. Finally, writing in from Cambodia’s tiny contemporary Jewish community, Craig Gerard looks at life in Phnom Penh in Playing Jewish Geography in Phnom Penh - The redevelopment of a community. To read more about Jewish life in Cambodia, have a look again at Craig’s article in AJL’s Spring 2010 issue, Raising a Jewish Child in Cambodia.

Have a good and sweet New Year!
From Kaifeng to the Kotel

A Chinese rabbi in the making

Yaakov Wang (center) at morning prayers
It is a warm summer day in Israel and despite the agreeable weather outside, Yaakov Wang is glued to his seat in the study hall.

Arrayed on the desk in front of him is a small mountain of Jewish texts, ranging from the Bible to the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (Concise Code of Jewish Law) to books on Jewish philosophy and thought.

Yaakov listens intently as his teacher at a Jerusalem-area yeshiva explains the intricacies of Jewish practice and belief. Puzzled by a particular explanation, he doesn't hesitate to ask for clarification when the need arises.

Satisfied with the answer he receives, he dutifully enters the information into a spiral notebook for further study and reflection.

It is a typical scene, one that is repeated throughout schools of Jewish learning across the land.

But Yaakov is not your typical yeshiva student.

He is a descendant of the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, and he is avidly pursuing an extraordinary dream: to become the first Chinese rabbi in 200 years.

Jews are believed to have settled in Kaifeng, which was one of China's imperial capitals, in the 8th century during the Song Dynasty or perhaps even earlier. Scholars believe they may have been Sephardic merchants from Persia or Iraq who made their way eastward along the Silk Route. With the blessing of the Chinese emperor, the Jews established themselves in the city, where they found an environment of tolerance and acceptance, in sharp contrast to much of the rest of the Diaspora.

In 1163, Kaifeng's Jews built a large and beautiful synagogue, which was subsequently renovated and rebuilt on numerous occasions throughout the centuries. At its peak, during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the Kaifeng Jewish community may have numbered as many as 5,000 people.

By the 17th century, a number of Chinese Jews had attained high ranks in the Chinese civil service, but along with success came the blight of assimilation, which took an increasingly heavy toll on the community and its cohesion.

By the mid-1800s, the Chinese Jews' knowledge and practice of Judaism had largely faded away. The last rabbi of the community is believed to have died in the early part of the 19th century, and the synagogue building was all but destroyed by a series of floods which struck the city in the 1840s and thereafter.

Nevertheless, against all odds, Kaifeng's Jews struggled to preserve their Jewish identity, passing down whatever little they knew to their progeny.

In the 1920s, a Chinese scholar named Chen Yuan wrote a series of treatises on religion in China, including “A study of the Israelite religion in Kaifeng.” Yuan noted the decline the community had endured, but took pains to recall that the remaining descendants still tried as best they could to observe various customs and rituals, including that of Yom Kippur. “Although the Kaifeng Jews today no longer have a temple where they can observe this holy day,” Yuan wrote, “they still fast and mourn without fail on the 10th day of the month.”

Nowadays, in this city of over 4.5 million, there are still several hundred people - perhaps a thousand at most - who are descendants of the Jewish community. Because of intermarriage in preceding generations, most if not all are no longer considered Jewish in the eyes of Jewish law.

In recent years, an awakening of sorts has taken place, especially among the younger generation of Kaifeng Jewish descendants, many of whom wish to learn more about their heritage and reclaim their roots.

It was this stirring which propelled Yaakov and six other Jewish descendants from Kaifeng to make aliyah in October 2009. They were brought to Israel by the Shavei Israel...
organization which I founded and chair.

Upon arrival at Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion airport, Yaakov could barely contain his emotion. “I am very excited to be here in the Holy Land,” he said, adding, “This is something that my ancestors dreamed about for generations, and now, thank G-d, I have finally made it.”

From the airport, the group went straight to the Western Wall, where they recited the “Shehehiyanu” blessing with great feeling, and then burst into a chorus of traditional Jewish songs.

For the first six months after his arrival, Yaakov studied Hebrew at a religious kibbutz in Israel’s Beit Shean valley, before going to yeshiva to deepen his Jewish knowledge and prepare to undergo a formal process of conversion.

He dove into his studies with alacrity, thirsty to acquaint himself with the ways of his ancestors.

As a youth growing up in Kaifeng, Yaakov had a strong if somewhat vague sense of his Jewish heritage. Whenever he joined friends for dinner, he recalls, he was the only one who did not order pork, which is no small matter in a country where that particular non-kosher dish is a cultural and culinary norm. But for Yaakov, it was one of the only ways he knew to express his attachment to being Jewish.

Yaakov is especially passionate about mastering Hebrew, in part thanks to the influence of his grandfather. “He knew Jews had their own language,” he explains, “but he didn’t know the language itself.”

Despite their isolation, the Jews in Kaifeng were reminded of their heritage daily; until recently, their internal documents listed their ethnic identity as “Jewish.”

In middle school, when Yaakov’s fellow students found out he was Jewish, they would comment, “now I know why you are cleverer than me,” he recalls with a wry smile.

His connection with his roots is even more pronounced: his Chinese surname is “Yage” which derives from the Biblical
The writer is a former adviser to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and serves as the Chairman of Shavei Israel (www.shavei.org), a Jerusalem-based organization that assists “lost Jews” seeking to return to the Jewish people.

Yaakov Wang (on left) working on kibbutz
Are you Jewish?” I am asked. This is not new to me. I hear this all the time because my last name ends in “burg,” a common Jewish suffix.

So I wasn’t surprised when I heard it from Arnold, a new friend of mine from the local gym in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. He knew my last name because I had handed him my business card weeks before. And he was, after all, as bold as the espresso in the coffee shop where I met him.

When he asked me, over coffee, I shook my head and smiled. As this is not the first time I have had this conversation, I have my stock responses at hand, but yet I replied, “No, I’m not actually. I was raised Catholic. Why do you ask?”

I waited for the usual explanation — my name — but it never came. “Well, of course because you have a Chinese husband,” Arnold offered without hesitation as if he was merely stating the obvious as he casually leaned back in his chair. “You usually see Jewish women married to Chinese men.” Arnold’s words hit me like a jolt of caffeine — I’d never heard this before.

As a Western woman married to a Chinese man, I knew I was a minority when compared to the ubiquitous couples of Western men and Chinese women around the world. But all of a sudden, I wondered if I also was a minority within the world of Western wives and Chinese husbands. Was Arnold right? Do more Jewish women really love Chinese men? Could there be any truth to this? Was there a connection?

Even before I raced home to google “Jewish women” and “Chinese men,” I realized it wasn’t the first time I’d heard the words “Jewish” and “Chinese” put together. When I first visited Kaifeng, China in 1999, I learned about the city’s Sephardic Jewish community, which lasted over 700 years. Later, when I lived in Shanghai, I read a magazine article about the Jews of Shanghai, who found refuge there in the 1930s during the Holocaust.

As I scoured the Internet and the library, I found more evidence that Chinese and Chosen wasn’t just in Arnold’s head. I discovered numerous articles exploring the Jewish love affair with Chinese food, from its place in a traditional “Jewish Christmas” in the US to the existence of kosher Chinese restaurants such as Genghis Cohen and China Glatt. Deborah Jiang Stein, in her article “What’s With the Jewish Man/Asian Woman Connection, Anyway?” wrote that “Jews and Chinese have been referred to as ‘people..."
of the book,” when...the intellectual appears to be fading from the American culture,” and mentioned “similarities in family values and upbringing.” In the play The Men of Mah Jongg, one man even described this ancient Chinese game as “invented by Chinese men and stolen by Jewish women.”

While these connections, cuisine, history and mahjong, were interesting, what about actual relationships? Then I found a study titled “In Search of the Right Spouse: Interracial Marriage among Chinese and Japanese Americans,” which offered this insight:

...it appears that there is a propensity for our interviewees to meet and date Jews in college or in their professional fields and marry them. Eighteen percent of the Chinese and Japanese American women and men we interviewed were married to Jewish partners. Five described how they shared a cultural affinity with their Jewish spouses; most often they mentioned how both cultures valued strong family ties and educational achievement. Interviewees also described their Jewish spouses as having a sense of “ethnic tradition” and an immigrant legacy found lacking in non-Jewish whites they had known or dated.

Suddenly, I remembered what a Chinese-American Ivy League graduate once told me -- that the 80 percent of Chinese men at his university who didn’t date Asians dated Jewish women. While that statistic might be difficult to verify and is likely inflated, the statement was nonetheless an interesting observation, intriguing.

When I thought about it, Jewish women wrote and produced some of the most popular creative works about relationships with Chinese men. Anna Sophie Loewenberg embraced the sons of Han in her online TV series Sexy Beijing. Rachel DeWoskin bared her love affairs with Chinese men -- onscreen and off -- in the book Foreign Babes in Beijing. And Susan Blumberg-Kason, author of All the Tea in Chicago, is turning experiences from her former marriage to a Chinese man into a memoir. Did they have any answers?

Blumberg-Kason believes Chinese men and Jewish women have such an affinity because most Chinese are atheists, making religion less of a family issue. “Even though we’re now divorced, my former husband and I just celebrated with our son at his bar mitzvah. I think if Jake’s dad had had another religion, the bar mitzvah might not have resonated as much as it had. Even when Jake was a baby, it was easier at the holidays because we celebrated the Jewish ones and the Chinese ones, but there was no religious conflict between the two.”

According to DeWoskin, it’s more a question of location. “My instinct is that if there are more Jewish girls in love with Chinese boys, then it’s probably the result of Jewish girls being more likely to come to China in the first place,” she said, wondering if more Jews enrolled in East Asian studies or became China scholars like her own father.

After seeing Sexy Beijing’s two-part “Freudian Episode,” I think Loewenberg would agree with her.

“When is it that I find Chinese men so fascinating, so masculine, and so very sexy?” Loewenberg asked. “I just can’t seem to get over this obsession with Chinese men. So I’m going to talk to the one person who might be able to analyze my neurosis -- Dr. Peter Loewenberg, historian, psychoanalyst and my father.”

She then sits down with him at a lakeside cafe in Hangzhou for a discussion. “Let me ask you a psychoanalytic question,” said Loewenberg. “What do you think my obsession with finding a Chinese husband has to do with my relationship with my father, and his relationship with his mother?”

Her father’s response, “I think you have some identification with your father’s Chinese childhood.” Making reference to the fact that he and Loewenberg’s grandparents lived in Shanghai during the 1930s – a personal connection the two then explore, including a search for the old family home on Nanchang Road. Watching this episode brought me full circle right back to the historical
connection I examined when I first pondered the question of Jewish women and Chinese men. For Loewenberg, history was the reason, and a powerful one at that but wasn’t there more to it?

I never did find any indisputable, black-and-white statistics to answer my question. But, yet, all the evidence I uncovered lined up before me in terracotta-warrior fashion, and I couldn’t help but see the reality. Jewish women and Chinese men really do have a special connection -- probably far more than us shiksas and Chinese men ever will.

“As my father returns to America and I return to Beijing, I can’t help but wonder if perhaps one day my Chinese grandchildren will look back at the choices I made in life and love, and marvel at how their family survived the burdens of history,” said Loewenberg. I, however, had to marvel at her story. Her romance with Chinese men had such an epic background, intertwined in the history and culture her people shared with China for thousands of years. My story, on the other hand, began with a serendipitous, last-minute decision to teach in China. Nothing about my Catholic upbringing or Midwestern suburban childhood suggested I would ever end up in the arms of a Chinese man.

Then again, Loewenberg still had to make her own choices “in life and love.” Didn’t I do the same? In that sense, we belonged to the same tradition -- of Western women who dared to love China, and its men. ¶

Writer and founder of the award-winning blog Speaking of China, Jocelyn Eikenburg is one of the most prominent voices on the web for Chinese men and Western women in love. She draws on her own marriage to a Hangzhou native to explore love, family and relationships in China through her writing. Her writing credits include Matador, the Global Times and the Idaho State Journal. Jocelyn found her passion for writing — as well as her true love — while living and working for five and a half years in China, including Zhengzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai. A Cleveland, Ohio native, Jocelyn is currently working on a memoir about love and marriage in China.

*Viewpoint*
by Jocelyn Eikenburg

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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.

Asian Jewish Life wishes you Shana Tova U’metuka Have a very happy and sweet year!

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Black Sheep Cousins, Illegally Obtained Organs, Mail-Order Brides

And a story any traveler in China can relate to
In 2008, author Daniel Asa Rose traveled with his cousin Larry to Beijing in search of the impossible: a new kidney. While it’s illegal for Westerners to obtain organ transplants in China, Larry’s life was on the line. Rose chronicled these adventures in his second memoir, Larry’s Kidney: Being the True Story of How I Found Myself in China with My Black Sheep Cousin and His Mail-Order Bride, Skirting the Law to Get Him a Transplant—and Save His Life (William Morrow, 2009). Asian Jewish Life’s Book Editor, Susan Blumberg-Kason sat down with Rose to discuss his earlier trips to China in the 1980s, his unbelievable adventures with Larry, and what happened afterward. It is a story where anything is possible.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): I found it so fascinating you’d traveled to China in the early 1980s. You were quite a pioneer! Had you ever thought of writing a book about your time there in the 1980s before you came up with the idea for Larry’s Kidney?

Daniel Asa Rose (DAR): No, but I wrote for Larry’s Kidney? in the early 1980s before you came up with the idea. I had my red-flag limo, my own driver, my own translator. Everyone was smoking on the plane and everyone wore gray. Since China had just opened to foreigners, the state-run tourist bureaus didn’t know how much to open up. I wanted to see Peking Man, so they opened it up for a private viewing. I wanted to see Mao’s tomb, so they brought me to the front of the line. We four were the first foreigners to visit sections of Jinan province. We rode an old steam train, accompanied by fireworks as we rolled through the province. People there had never seen Caucasians.

On my second trip, I traveled to Hong Kong and took the ferry over to southern China. I also stayed in Macau, which was just a small fishing village back then. I remember there was an old fireworks factory along the waterfront. I stayed around there, renting a room in an old colonial house with a front porch—a very different experience.

For my third visit, I went to Shanghai and Chengdu. That’s also the trip where I went to Tibet and landed in jail for three hours.

AJL: And then you returned to China after being away for 25 years! When you stepped foot in Beijing several years ago, what had changed the most since your last visit in 1984?

DAR: Back in ’84, I didn’t remember ever seeing rubber bands or plastic bags. I remember looking out over the roof of my hotel in Beijing and all I heard was bicycle bells. When I came back with Larry, I was struck by a multitude of colors, noise, food, modern architecture, and the highways that flew over everything.

AJL: Your visit to a Beijing synagogue was a pivotal moment in your memoir. Had you encountered other Jews in China back in the ’80s?

DAR: In 1984, I don’t remember Judaism coming up at all. I hadn’t really come into my Judaism back then. I was still rebelling. It wasn’t until 1988 when I took my boys to Belgium and France to trace my family’s escape from the Holocaust. [Editor’s note: Daniel Asa Rose wrote about this trip in his first memoir, Hiding Places: A Father and His Sons Retrace Their Family’s Escape from the Holocaust (Simon & Schuster, 2000)].

AJL: So going to synagogue on a Friday night wasn’t something you’d normally do at home?

DAR: I would not have gone to synagogue. I find God in my own ways, often on my bicycle and in other times. I’m very aware of my own need to give thanks. I’m always delighted when I bump into other Jews. Growing up in WASP Connecticut, as I describe in Hiding Places, I’ve always had this sense that we were this secret cult, not to reveal ourselves to outsiders.

AJL: It’s ironic that even though organ donation has been a controversial issue in some people’s interpretation of Jewish law, you found such great support in Beijing’s Jewish community.

DAR: Yes, there was something about the Beijing Jewish community that was so giving. At the end, I couldn’t believe they had said the Mi Shebeirach, the Jewish prayer for the sick, every Friday while Larry awaited his kidney. That’s what this trip was all about—learning about family. What constitutes family? Larry’s family had failed him. He turned to me because I was the only one in the family who he thought could help him. I then turned to the larger Jewish family halfway across the world in Beijing.

Both Jewish and Chinese cultures believe you should bury bodies intact,
and in many other ways the cultures are very similar. I think we’re very ignorant of what the Chinese are doing. We read our media scare stories, but I can’t help but think there’s a tinge of red menace in them. We in the US demonized the Chinese in the 1950s, and now we’re doing that with China and organ transplants. There are people in China who are very concerned about the morality of organ transplants. People in the US don’t have a monopoly on morality. People can act very righteous, just like in the 1950s.

AJL: Whatever happened to that iconic black and gold yarmulke that makes appearances throughout the book?

DAR: I have it. I wore it at my youngest son’s bar mitzvah last month.

AJL: You’re quite an adventurous eater, while Larry preferred to stick with Girl Scout cookies and US fast food. Do you keep kosher or try to adhere to a kosher-style diet when you can?

DAR: No, I eat everything. That wasn’t a problem.

AJL: I heard on your CNN interview that Larry has vanished again. Have you talked to him since the book came out a couple years ago or now that the book is out in paperback?

DAR: It was a very intense two months with him in China. I found him utterly fascinating and sympathetic. We spoke at the beginning after the book came out and discussed how there may or may not be a movie deal. He said, “It’s my story and you can’t have it.” Although I knew what Larry was all about, it was still a surprise.

AJL: That must have been so difficult after everything you’d been through with him.

DAR: That time with him was full of revelations. The final revelation was that he turned on me. It ruptured the whole family.

As for the person I call Burton, I was nervous about how he would take to the book. Eventually I received a note from him. He wrote that he loved the book. He laughed and he cried. And he signed his note Cousin Burton, which is not his real name. I was thrilled by his response.

I will say this for Larry: I asked him after we returned if he acknowledged the book was written with love. He said he got that.

AJL: Do you know if Larry has returned to China since his transplant surgery? Did he ever marry?

DAR: I do not know. We haven’t spoken in four years.

AJL: Did you come up with the title, Larry’s Kidney? I especially love the subtitle: Being the True Story of How I Found Myself in China with My Black Sheep Cousin and His Mail-Order Bride, Skirting the Law to Get Him a Transplant—and Save His Life. Was that your idea?

DAR: That was always the working title between my agent and me. I’d just call it the Larry’s Kidney book. I toyed with the idea of titling it Zhong Mei You Yi Wan Sui (Long Live the Friendship Between the Chinese and American Peoples), which would have been fun because it was so difficult to say, at least for me.

AJL: Have you kept in touch with any of the Chinese friends you met during your trip to China with Larry?

DAR: I’ve been in touch with my guide Jade. Jade to me is still the 24-year old woman with bubbles in her teeth. I don’t know what I believe about her. Maybe she was reporting on my activities. We’d had very intimate conversations. I kind of adopted her as my daughter. There was never impropriety, but there was love. She said people in China don’t talk about love, but it was a real love affair. I really fell in love with China. My heart was very, very full in those last few pages in that solo lift to the airport.

AJL: It was very brave of you to write so honestly and openly about your relationship with Jade. Many memoirists only select choice things to write about, but you didn’t hold back.

DAR: I learned a long time ago to just shoot it all—don’t hold it in. Back in my 20s and 30s, I didn’t want to tackle certain subjects. Now I’m 61 and I want to shoot it all.

AJL: That’s very admirable—and courageous of you. Are you working on a new book?

DAR: Yes, I’m writing another memoir. Believe it or not, it’s as crazy and unlikely as Larry’s Kidney, but takes place in the southern high desert of New Mexico. I’ve fallen in love with my little community out there as much as I fell in love with China. ✨

Daniel Asa Rose has offered Asian Jewish Life readers the opportunity to purchase autographed copies of his book. Kindly and quite bravely, he also welcomes comments and questions. You can email him at rose@danielasarose.com.
We wish you and your family a happy and sweet new year!

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We wish you and your family a happy and sweet new year!
I found the Bamboo beacons
Sinister in their cruel nakedness
Bound by last night’s winter lizard

Pines flaunt the color of my envy
Like Salome

You can barely see us
Drape the monolithic beast
With our fleeing footsteps
Slit by unforgiving gasps of wind
We were banished
From E-den
To Persian Goshen
For entertaining Nephilim
Along the invisible bonfire
Wall between Iran and Kurdistan
For chasing green
Hornets with unhallowed gifts
Into bloody rice crop circles
For always painting Dragon
Fruit in the broom closet
Swamp blue, leaving loyal wicks
Burning the remnant of violated flesh

You can keep your orchards
Your vineyards
Your cursed wells

We’ve struck gold in the serpent’s hostage kiss
70 Eruptions

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said, “Iran is a fortress that cannot be destroyed.”

Fiendship and Poe-Tree of Know Ledge:

That’s all
I knead
Now
(I found his armaments
Distracting an aberration)
That’s all
I can afford
To loose:

Sheeple of Slaughterhaus.
Mickey Maus
Without thought.
Without Memory of thorn
Ore substance.

The value of a Most Wanted womanizer?
$7 to appease a goddesshead of Fortresses

That is all, folks.

Vietnamaste Frum Ararat

“Might I remind you,” remarked Alex Epstein’s Bald opponent, in a dialect that has yet to merit unveiling, “that Chess was invented in India” and proceeds to balance a pair of Nabuta on his teacup, while contemplating suicide balm.

Since AJL’s Summer 2010 installment, Eliyahu Enriquez’s poetry has been featured in Temple Sinai’s Kol Ha-Neshama, HaLapid: Journal of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, MyJewishLearning.com, Alef: The NEXT Conversation, and Jews in ALL Hues, among others. He very much misses giving free glowstick shows to off-duty IDF soldiers c. 2004 and would one day like to donate his letters to The Garden Library For Migrant Communities in Tel Aviv. The recent passing of Samuel Menashe, as well as a flurry of published Haiku selections reflect his darkening Micro-Ditties. She’Chinatown is forthcoming.
In a series of short interrupted conversations with IsraAid Relief Program Japan Project Coordinator Yotam Polizer, come responses to interview questions as he rushes off again busy with work in the field. Each time, he again picks up where he left off. “Demand is high,” Polizer explains. This is the reality in the field during a humanitarian aid mission.

For Polizer, though, it is clear, that the reward is great. He explains that he is a true believer in the mission of IsraAid which first and foremost is to provide humanitarian assistance, focused on both development and relief, to people irrespective of religion, race or nationality. IsraAid is fueled by the desire to engage in Tikkun Olam, which is one of the core Jewish values, and which is the responsibility to fix what is wrong in the world. When asked about the importance of IsraAid as serving as an unofficial goodwill ambassador, a PR agent and creating a positive face for Israel abroad, Polizer admits this is a good result, but not a motivator and instead merely incidental to the aid they are giving.

In Asia alone they have successfully implemented numerous vital aid operations that have crossed many cultural boundaries. They were instrumental in the coordination of aid operations.
following the Indian Ocean tsunami, they sent relief workers to Myanmar to help with recovery after a major cyclone hit and they responded to give aid in the Philippines after massive typhoons struck. They have also been involved in projects in countries that include Nepal, China and India.

IsraAid has a keen sense of awareness of the importance of culture and takes their own mandate seriously to provide aid with full respect to culture and customs of the local beneficiaries. A cultural sensitivity training, specific to each country, is required. In Japan, Polizer explains, their ability to tailor aid to meet local cultural norms has been essential to the success of their mission. There are many cultural differences at play. In Japan one of these barriers includes the Japanese cultural norm of keeping emotions controlled, internal, and guarded. In a post-trauma therapy setting, like the one IsraAid has been facilitating, this provides an extra challenge for the teams. Polizer explained that this closed society culture made it difficult for local people to even allow themselves to be helped.

It has to have been a quick learn for IsraAid’s Japan-knowledge, as they first arrived in Japan only four days after the tsunami. Since then, they have focused on a number of different areas of aid. In the immediate aftermath, aid took the form, for example, of responding to a Japanese hospital’s request for Altroxin to treat iodine poisoning. Thanks to IsraAid this drug reached 1,500 people. Other aid, like long-term psychological services and therapy, led by Israel’s Dr. Gillat Raisch, is more complex and the effect the aid has on people is not immediate, but it is never-the-less invaluable.

But IsraAid is in Japan for the long-haul, now six months out they are still continuously sending aid teams. The Israeli teams are operating in Japan on two-three week shifts. They then return to Israel and then there is a two-three week gap before the next team arrives. The focus of this work now is mainly post-trauma psychological treatment for children in five towns: Watari, Natori, Yamamoto, Shinchi and Iwanuma. The team, though relying on Israeli knowhow and experience, use creative techniques to reach their Japanese counterparts including the use of origami, a traditional Japanese paper craft, to encourage the expression of deep emotion. Overall, art therapies with adaptations have been very successful in Japan. They also focus on movement, games and music as techniques for expression when working with children. Polizer talks about the impact, seeing children empowered with paint and brushes, simply painting the word Tsunami in thick bold brush strokes in the weeks immediately following the disaster. While they paint their fear and trauma, they are also helped to paint their hopes and joys.

The IsraAid team trains Japanese educators and social workers to learn to implement all of these techniques. Ultimately, the goal is to give special...
training to a team of local experts to run a post-trauma treatment center independently.

Mr. Shachar Zahavi, Chairman of IsraAid, like the rest of the team was touched by the experience and summarized, “I’m really happy we could support the Japanese people who suffered so much from both the tsunami and radiation. The Israeli experience in the field of post-trauma is really valuable in Japan where such treatments are rare.”

Because of the rarity of this type of treatment in Japanese culture, many of the educators that are being trained have not even dealt with their own reaction to the trauma and require assistance working through their own pain.

Quite shockingly, while the teams are largely focused on post-trauma aid, Polizer explained that for some in Japan, even six months after the disaster, they are still experiencing the trauma on an everyday basis and IsraAid continues to respond to their continuing needs. The road to recovery in these areas still in crisis will be long. In Shinchi, located a mere 60k from Fukushima, residents must stay indoors in order to limit their level of exposure to radiation. Children are only allowed out five minutes a day. The team will also start working in Minami Soma, only 30k from Fukushima. As for how the Israeli team is able to protect themselves, Polizer responded that they have investigated the situation thoroughly and would not be at personal risk due to the limitations on their potential exposure by a shortened stay in the areas.

Other aid recipients are responding well to IsraAid’s therapy. Some local teachers IsraAid has been working with and training have expressed tremendous gratitude for what in most instances was the only time they had been afforded the opportunity to express and work through their own emotions. In addition to fear and trauma, there is an overwhelming sense of guilt that more could not have been saved.

Hailing from Israel, where unfortunately, terror and the resulting trauma are all too familiar to many, the IsraAid teams’ skills have been finely tuned and there is perhaps an inherent greater awareness of what the Japanese need to heal. “It’s our opportunity to help by sharing Israeli knowledge and knowhow to help as many people as we can,” summarizes Polizer.

IsraAid also serves as a coordinating body for Israeli and Jewish organizations engaged in Tikkun Olam. Many of their member organizations have also provided aid to the region including: Save a Child’s Heart, the American Jewish Committee (AJC), The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), Fast Israeli Rescue and Search Team (F.I.R.S.T.) and Tevel b’Tzedek.

For more information on IsraAid, please see their website at http://www.israaid.org.il/
When Past and Present Collide

Reshaping the future of the historic Shanghai Ghetto
Seemingly there is a real tension in Shanghai’s Tilanqiao district. The tension is between competing interests: historic significance versus a rapidly growing urban population (in need of housing and basic communal amenities) versus businesses looking to expand and cash in on the plethora of potential opportunities. At the center of the debate over land use and redevelopment lies the fate of what was once the Shanghai Jewish Ghetto.

But Shanghai is a city where the tension between sharp contrasts defines its beauty, where old and new clash to create something entirely one-of-a-kind, something wholly Shanghai. Urban growth is often dramatic and the only certainty often is rapid change. While much of Tilanqiao is rundown and ramshackle, its notable features include Ohel Moishe Synagogue, Tilanqiao Prison, Xiahai Temple, Wæside Park (today’s Huoshan Park), the former site of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), the Jewish Settlement in Ward Road (today’s Changyang Road) and the Mascot Roof Garden. The Ohel Moishe Synagogue, established in 1907, already recently underwent its own massive renovation and was re-opened to the public in 2008. It now serves as the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum and is a true monument to the friendship between the Jews and the Chinese who called Hongkou home.

A collaborative project launched in October 2010 is now well underway to develop a conservation plan for the former ghetto, within the context and reality of Shanghai’s rapid urban development. The participating students from Tel Aviv University and from Shanghai’s Tongji Urban Planning and Design Institute of Tongji University will soon present their proposed designs at a joint forum in Shanghai in October 2011. At the forum, their projects will be presented to the local government as well as the general public.

At their heart, the students’ designs reflect the understanding of the historic significance of the former Jewish Ghetto in Shanghai. While urban renewal can sometimes result in the...
demolition and destruction of entire neighborhoods and a burying of the past, the proposed designs reflect a real sensitivity to the historical significance of the ghetto. But what really is the value of the memory of approximately 30,000 Jews who left the city sixty years ago, after inhabiting the ghetto for a period of time that spanned no more than 16 years, in a country of one billion with a history that spans from ancient times to the present? Well, as the popularity of the former ghetto as a tourist attraction continues to grow, there is a real economic value that is perhaps easier to quantify than the value of sentiment, but the importance of this area in the collective memory of the Chinese of Hongkou and the former Jewish residents who lived among them can’t be dismissed.

This ghetto was not like the infamous ghettos of Europe where Jews were rounded up and forced to live in squalid conditions only to await transport to death camps. The Shanghai Ghetto, though conditions were certainly far from ideal, was a safe haven that saved the lives of tens of thousands of Jews with literally nowhere else in the world to go to escape the horrors of Europe. Shanghai was the last open port and its established Jewish community mobilized to meet the needs of their brethren as the already crowded city, hit by wartime shortages and serious deprivations, swelled overnight. The Jewish refugees lived side-by-side with their Chinese neighbors and together they weathered the harsh realities of life in a war-ravaged city and Japanese occupation. It is a story of true friendship and cooperation between two peoples even in the most adverse of conditions.

There is an incredible sense of responsibility on the part of the collaborative team and its visionary leaders that include Dr. Wang Jun, Architect, Chief Researcher at Shanghai’s Tongji Urban Planning and Design Institute, Tongji University and Professor Moshe Margalith, Architect, UNESCO Chair on Modern Heritage and Head of the Tel Aviv Institute for Study and Research of Architecture, Tel Aviv University. Ultimately, the upcoming October forum to be held in Shanghai anticipates the official foundation of the Sino Jewish Innovation Center in Shanghai that will promote the continuation of the cooperation
between the Chinese and Jewish people. The Institute will lead with the theme “learning from the past looking forward to the future” and will present the continuous and unique role of Shanghai as a multi-cultural city, a center where dialogue and understanding between diverse peoples is evident.

The founders of the Sino Jewish Innovation Center also hope to encourage the responsible conservation of the entire area. A “mixed use” environment is envisioned consisting of residential, business, tourism and commerce. This “mixed use” concept actually mirrors the world of the former Jewish ghetto. According to Hila Sofrin, one of the students participating in the project from the Tel Aviv University team, “This notion existed very much so in the days of the Jewish Ghetto. The Jews brought with them the cafes from Austria and many other institutes of education and culture.”

The titles of the Tel Aviv University students’ work alone speak to the complexity of the task at hand, “Slated for Demolition” by Adi Mor, “Small touch big difference” by Oded Narkis, “MiroShanghai” by Erez Gross & Dori Sadan, and “redefining 0.00+” by Hila Sofrin. In their briefs they discuss the competing forces at work and the delicate balances between modernity and history, technology and authenticity, and Chinese and European influences that the ultimate design will need to encompass. In the true spirit of multi-cultural cooperation and sensitivity, the Tel Aviv student team indicated that, “the Chinese propositions tried to embed Jewish aspects into their projects and the Israeli propositions tried to embed the Chinese spirit into their projects.” Each project raises different questions regarding conservation, modernity, community and urbanism but all reflect common ground and unified visions achieved through the yearlong multi-disciplinary research of the area’s historic and contemporary populations. This research broadened the Chinese and Israeli teams’ understanding that the redevelopment of Tilanqiao is not just about places but is about people, their culture, values and heritage.

Together the World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for the Asia and the Pacific Region (WHITRAP), Tangji University, Tel Aviv University and the Zalman Shazar Center will jointly study all the proposals for the conservation plan. Throughout 2012, the joint cooperative will move forward with the formulation of strategic planning for the Ghetto’s conservation and the foundation of the Sino Jewish Innovation Center in the former ghetto area. By the end of 2012, an exhibition of the Ghetto’s past and future will feature in Beit Hatfutsot, the Diaspora Museum on the campus of Tel Aviv University.

Ultimately a development plan will be created that will aim to blend the modern, urban landscape with the historical and the East with the West and will combine elements of all the proposed designs. Whereas previous proposals for the redevelopment of the area have not gone forward, Ms. Sofrin reflects the collaborative teams’ view that, “cooperation of Jews and Chinese might just be the solution.”

In spite of the project’s noticeable achievements, the financing is rather difficult. Contributions to this project should be extended to the order of: Tel Aviv University, Prof. Moshe Margalith, Head Tel Aviv Institute, Shanghai Ghetto Project. Please email mm@margalith-arch.com for details.
Customs
Abigail felt her body sway in unison with the movement of the train. She tightened her arm around the baby and adjusted her sari over the child as it suckled at her breast. The rocking movement seemed to calm the baby although Abigail's toddler son did not like it. He stood on the wooden bench beside her brother-in-law, who tried to entertain him with particulars from the scenery as it fled past the window. Barukh was accompanying his brother's family on the journey home to Jwalanagar. Abigail's husband had died ten days earlier so now the little family was returning to the home of the paternal extended family.

Abigail did not wish to return but she had no choice. Since she had moved in with her husband's family for a few months after her wedding, she knew what awaited her there. Barukh had married six months before she and Asher had married so Rebecca, his wife, was the other outsider in the family. Abigail was lucky that her husband had a job far from home. He worked for Indian Railways and was stationed in Karachi. He rented a small two room house in the city so Abigail escaped the duties of a daughter-in-law in a large family. Rebecca stayed a year longer. When Asher heard of a 'job opening' with the Customs in the port, he applied for the position on his elder brother's behalf. Barukh arrived for the interviews and was given the job. At the time of Asher's death he and Rebecca were the only family Abigail had in the city.

Abigail looked at her brother-in-law. He had always been a friend to her. He had taken care of the funeral and made all the arrangements. Rebecca was different. She seemed to resent Abigail's ability to make friends easily. The women from the neighbourhood, who came to help during the shiva, all fell silent when Rebecca was around. To make matters worse Abigail had two children and Rebecca had none.

Abigail closed her eyes. The backdrop of her eyelids allowed her to relive scenes from the past ten days without interruption from the world around her. She remembered the day three men had knocked on her door. She thought it strange that she did not remember their names, only what they wore. One was dressed in a dhoti, shirt and waistcoat. He had a tilak of sandalwood paste on his forehead with grains of rice still stuck in it from his morning puja or prayers. The second wore tight churidar pyjamas, a long sherwani coat and a round hat of the Muslims. The third was in western clothes. In her mind she once again lived through the time the news was broken to her. “Behnji, sister, we have bad news. Mr. Asher Samson was working in the railway yard and there was more than the usual noise of shunted wagons, moving trains and the whistles of engines. The army men were unloading two trains with their supplies, so there were more trucks and raised voices. Mr. Samson, without looking, stepped in front of an oncoming engine.”

Abigail had asked to see the body but the man in western clothes had said, “I would advise against it. There is not much left. Your husband’s brother has been asked to identify the body. We will give it to you in a sealed coffin. Try and remember him as he was.” He gave her Asher's wristwatch and wedding ring. She had looked uncomprehendingly at the objects in her hand. “Keep them for the boy” he had said.

The baby stopped sucking. Abigail adjusted her breast and inner clothes before she lifted her sari and removed her daughter to burp her against her shoulder.

"How old are you?” Barukh asked after the baby had burped and brought up some milk on the little towel Abigail had placed on her shoulder.

“I completed nineteen three months ago” she replied.

“Ah, yes. You married at sixteen. You are so young. What are you going to do?”

“I don't know. Your parents will not allow me to go out and work. I am not properly educated. Who will give me a decent job without at least a matriculation certificate? I do not want to live on the charity of my father-in-law or brothers-in-law. My children will be the orphans the family is taking care of. So far they are the only grandchildren but there are six brothers who will marry and have children of their own. A time will come when they will resent feeding, clothing and educating..."
my children. Asher is dead but I cannot die. I have his children to care for.”

“Abby, I am going to say something that I will never say again. Go back to your parents’ home.”

“They will not let me come back. I belong to your family now. Your parents are my parents. An Indian girl never returns to her first family no matter how bad things become in her husband’s home” Abigail explained.

“These are only customs that are cruel to women and favourable to men. In our home you will be a slave in the kitchen and laundry room. My mother is still having babies. Penny is one year old and mother can have more. I know what my brothers and sisters are capable of. In a society where men and women do not mix very much a young and pretty girl is not safe if she has nobody to protect her. I have eyes and I see things. If you complain to my mother she will blame you, not her son. She’ll find fault with your behaviour or your clothes. That is, if she believes you in the first place. Listen to my advice as an elder brother and leave.”

“How? My parents will not want me back. They will not care for a daughter and her children. I will be a charity case in their house too. I am a Samson now. Where can I go if I leave your home? How will I feed my children?”

“I have an idea,” Barukh said. “Asher had a life insurance policy and has named you as his beneficiary. I made him open it. The Railways will also give some compensation. I will collect it all and bring it to you when I come home on leave next year. Asher gave me the authority to deal with his affairs in his absence. What ever you do, don’t give this money to the family. There are enough brothers to help there. Take it and move out. Buy into some small business, open a shop, do something that will help your children. Asher has done what he could for the family. Now he is not here to take care of you or his babies. You have to do it for him.”

“We have our customs and traditions. What will people say?” Abigail asked.
“Damn the people. Everybody will have something to say no matter what you do. Nobody will come to suffer for you or your children. Forget the customs. They are made by man and can be broken by man.”

Abigail was silent for a few minutes. Then she said, “Asher and I had our first argument they day he died. I told him that I would stop bringing him his cup of tea in bed. I was only joking but he took it seriously. He said many unkind things but when I started to cry he was sorry and we made up before he left for work. I loved him very much. I don’t know why I teased him that morning. I never wanted to make him feel that he was unimportant to me.”

Abigail realized the truth on this statement. They did not talk much during the rest of the journey. There was a three hour wait at a railway junction, whose name Abigail forgot. The luggage had been taken off the train but the waiting rooms were too crowded to accommodate them or their bags and boxes. Somebody had to sit with it to make sure that nothing was stolen. Barukh took Jonathan to the toilet immediately because the child had been afraid to use the one on the train. Barukh washed himself and the child at a tap before he bought lunch. He then came back to take his turn with their luggage and sent her to wash and eat.

Abigail left the baby asleep with her brother-in-law and made her way towards the restaurant. An old man stopped her. “Listen to me my daughter” he said. “There are troubles ahead of you but you will find a measure of happiness some day. Listen to what your jeth, your elder brother-in-law is saying.” Abigail was surprised. She thought that perhaps, this man dressed as a sadhu, a Hindu holy man, in saffron coloured clothes and beads, had been on the train with them and had heard what Barukh had said. He probably wanted money and was pretending to be a fortune teller. She opened her purse but he stopped her. “Hear what I have to say. There is no bigger incentive than money to convince people to break customs and traditions. Use your money to rent a house for both you and your son. A shop at the crossroads, the one where there is a large neem tree and a public park, will be on sale next year. Do not worry. Things will work out in spite of losses you still have to bear.”

“What do you mean?” Abigail asked.

“I speak about your daughter my child. The only reason I have spoken to you is to give you strength, to ask you not to lose faith after your recent loss and more trouble to come. Go and have something to eat now.” He joined his palms together and said “Pranam.” Abigail wished him with the same gesture and word. She then watched him disappear into the crowd on the platform.

Abigail followed the sadhu’s advice and got something to eat. She could not bear to waste time in a restaurant so she bought some puris and spiced vegetables from a vendor and ate it in a relatively quiet area of the platform. She then drank some water from a tap and went back to her family. The baby slept peacefully in Barukh’s arms. Abigail was angry with herself for letting the words of a starving beggar, who would probably say anything to get a piece of bread, upset her so much. She took Jonathan for a walk along the platform so that Barukh could have some rest from the restless boy.

They waited for the train that stopped at Jwalanagar. This train came all the way from Delhi, so by the time they got on board it was already very crowded. Barukh managed to get two seats and they sat squashed between the other passengers. It was many hours later that Abigail got enough place to curl up with her baby beside her. Even in this cramped position she managed to sleep since she was very tired. Barukh nodded in a sitting position while Jonathan slept on his lap.

When Abigail awoke she sensed that something was wrong. She checked her luggage. The locks were in tact. Barukh had found place enough to curl up on the bench and Jonathan was asleep beside him. There were fewer passengers than before. They must be nearing Jwalanagar.

She broke into a cold sweat as fear constricted her chest and made it difficult for her to breathe. In the faint light from the single overhead lamp she looked at her baby daughter. The child’s eyes were fixed and open. She picked her up and suppressed the scream that rose to her throat. The child was cold. She felt for a pulse but could not find it. She held the baby’s face against her cheek. There was no breath. Her hand upon the chest felt no heart beat. Slowly she placed her hand on the baby’s face and closed the eyes. She knew
that the other passengers would not travel with a corpse. The Hindus would consider it a loss of caste. The Railway authorities would make them get off the train and bury the child. Abigail had to pretend that everything was fine. She folded one leg upon the bench and placed the baby upon her lap. She patted the shoulder rhythmically as though she were trying to put the child to sleep.

When Barukh awoke he looked at her and asked in Marathi, “Kai zhala? What has happened?”

“I don’t know when it happened,” she answered in the same language, “but the baby is dead. She had no fever and she nursed well. I changed her diaper not more than two hours ago. Don’t look at her now. I don’t want the others to know.”

“We have four hours more before we reach Jwalanagar. Just keep up the pretence” he said.

Abigail held her dead baby on her lap for four hours. When they arrived at Jwalanagar, she held the baby’s face against her shoulder all the way from the platform to the tonga. In the tonga she placed the baby in the crook of her arm with the face turned towards her breast.

Asher’s parents came out on to the verandah as the tonga drew up. Two of his brothers lifted out the luggage and took it into the house. His father picked up Jonathan and kissed him. His mother came towards Abigail with her arms outstretched for the baby. Abigail took a step backwards.

“Why can’t you give me my granddaughter? I’ve never seen her. Come on, give her to me.” It was more of a command than a request.

“The baby is dead” Barukh said in a soft but clear voice.

The grandmother dropped her arms. Everybody stopped what they were doing and turned to look at Abigail. Abigail went into the house and according to custom placed the corpse not on the bed but on the floor. She opened her steel trunk and took out clean clothes and a towel. She needed to remove the coal dust, smoke and other dirt collected during the journey from off her person. Before she entered the bathroom she heard one of Asher’s sisters say, “Lazy, sleepy woman. She rolled over the baby in her sleep and smothered it. Look she has left the body for us to wash.”

“So it has started already” Abigail thought. “There was no place to stretch or turn leave alone roll. I hope that the girl who said this never travels anything but third class like I did with my children just because all our money went into the purchase of this house.” She suppressed her anger and said in a meek voice, “I cannot bathe her while I am dirty myself. Do not worry Sister, I will wash my baby myself. You just ask the boys to inform the Jewish community and to make the funeral arrangements.”

She had shown humility and the proper amount of dependence that was expected. “Custom,” Abigail thought. “Brother Barukh is right. Some customs need to be broken. A person has to be financially independent in order to break them. Once I can leave, I will.”

Sophie Judah was born in 1949 in Jabalpur, in Central India, to Bene Israel parents. In 1972 she moved to Israel where she later studied English Literature at the Bar-Ilan University. In 2007, she published a collection of short stories, Dropped from Heaven, that chronicles life in a mythical Indian town, Jwalanagar, which is not unlike the Jabalpur of her youth.
Playing Jewish Geography in Phnom Penh

The redevelopment of a community
Phnom Penh is a small town, especially when you are an expat. It's common to run into people you know at the coffee shop, the grocery store, the local pub… it seems once you are around long enough, you get to know most of the people worth knowing, despite the transient nature of the population. This is even truer of the Jewish community in Cambodia; it's like an easy game of Jewish Geography. “Oh, do you know Sol who works at Save the Children?” “Yes, of course I know Sol, his children go to preschool with mine.” The game is almost impossible to lose. It's fast paced and only concludes when everyone in the community is named.

Yet as connected as we are, there are two very distinct ways that Phnom Penh Jews practice their religion. In this town with such a small Jewish population, is there room for two different Jewish communities?

“The Jews in Cambodia are very progressive,” says Brad Gordon, one of the Jewish community’s informal organizers. “Many of them work for NGOs, they are very bright, have strong opinions, but also are very busy.” The informal Jewish community started getting together during the Jewish holidays in the mid-early part of the millennium decade. They conducted successful sedars and by 2008, the group began to get more serious. At that point, an organizing committee was formed to plan holiday events and Shabbat dinners. There was even talk about having a charter or creating a Jewish NGO. In 2008, the committee sponsored Rabbi Jill Jacobs, a Conservative rabbi from New York, to fly to Cambodia and lead High Holiday services. “People were extremely grateful this was organized,” says Brad, who personally handled a lot of the logistical heavy lifting. Brad’s experience as a board member of the Jewish Community Center in Tokyo before living in Phnom Penh gave him a good perspective and the right contacts to manage such an operation.

Around this time, Chabad started seriously considering opening a Jewish Center in Cambodia. Brad had been in touch with the Chabad rabbi in Bangkok, whom he says he maintains a very good relationship with. Chabad started researching a Phnom Penh option back in 2007 and during consecutive trips to Cambodia, Chabad representatives met with the informal committee. Alysha Beyer, a committee member at the time, said this meeting was extremely cordial, and the Bangkok rabbi was looking for ways to coordinate and support the continuing efforts of the Jewish community in Phnom Penh.

There were others on the committee who warmly welcomed Chabad into the fold, so much so that they felt holding committee meetings to decide what the Jewish community should do was frivolous. Chabad, they opined, would take care of this. Others on the committee saw Chabad as a resource, not a replacement for their own work. At the end of 2009, Chabad opened the Jewish Center of Cambodia. Rabbi Bentzion Butman and his family became Cambodia’s first permanently staffed Chabad rabbi. The center, which functions as a shul, a kosher restaurant and food store, a beit midrash, and the rabbi’s home, is located on a quiet residential street in the heart of Phnom Penh. Rabbi Butman’s office is lined with bookshelves, and piled high with leather bound Jewish texts. When he speaks, as a good rabbi should, he does so with parables and analogies. He may be a young rabbi, but after studying in yeshiva for 16 hours a day for 10 years, he clearly knows his texts and loves to tell stories.

Rabbi Butman also brings with him to Cambodia the massive organizational skills of Chabad. He has a polished website, a slick email template, and a full online database of texts, midrashim, and religious resources. If you Google “Jewish Cambodia,” the first few results are for Chabad’s site. More relevant than that, there is now a community center, an actual place to meet for prayer. It is the rabbi’s full time job to find Jews in Cambodia and, as Rabbi Butman put
Despite what Chabad brings to the community, some people still prefer a more liberal service or feel uncomfortable with a mechitza dividing the men and women. “It is not for everyone,” some prefer. Rabbi Butman has a practical view of the issue, and says this: “Someone who hasn’t grown up with all of the traditions may not be able to eat the whole meal right now; the food might be strange to you. That’s OK. Start with one serving, with one spoon.” It is a refrain new parents use often with their children: try it, you might like it.

This is Chabad’s success, especially in a place like Cambodia. They are the most visible game in town and really do make themselves accessible to all. For some Jews, especially Israelis, Chabad really resonates with the style of Judaism they are comfortable with. And for the Jews who aren’t comfortable with the Orthodox dogma, the rabbi encourages to try a little, get comfortable with that, then try a little more.

And yet… with Chabad as an option, the informal Jewish community has done little in the way of organizing events. The committee, who was so active in 2008, has found themselves disbanded; some committee members moved away from Phnom Penh, some are content with Chabad, and others find they are too busy with work and life to organize and promote events. Brad Gordon admits, “If we don’t organize, at least there is something going on.”

Alysha Beyer agrees, but takes it a step further. She has been organizing Jewish community events since her arrival in Phnom Penh in September of 2008 and in Zambia prior to that. Growing up attending Conservative Jewish day schools and having “lots of rabbis in the family,” gave her a strong sense of Jewish identity, and it is critical for her to pass these onto her children. Alysha acknowledges it’s difficult to motivate to plan a Jewish community event when half of Phnom Penh’s small Jewish population will be attending a competing event that same day. “It was just as easy for me to go to a Chabad event,” she says.

In 2008, when Brad, Alysha and the rest of group organized Rabbi Jill Jacobs to lead High Holiday services in a rented hall in Phnom Penh, the committee seemed poised on the edge of something big, something organic and wholly Jewish Cambodia. “It really felt like a strong Jewish community,” says Alysha of that time. The 2008 Chanukah party had about 60 people attending, and in spring of 2009 the committee organized an equally successful Purim party, complete with little Mordechais and Queen Esthers sitting down to learn about the holiday taught by Alysha. The committee’s 2009 Pesach seder had over 30 people attending. In 2009, just prior to Chabad’s arrival, the committee again brought a rabbi from the U.S. to lead successful High Holiday services in a hotel conference room.

Fast forward to 2010, and the committee was no longer meeting, but Brad and Alysha did organize High Holiday services to be held at a member’s home, though they did not bring a rabbi to lead them. There was a small Chanukah gathering at the end of the year. In 2011, Chabad took the lead on both Pesach and Purim gatherings (among all of the other Jewish holidays). It is unclear whether the informal group will get together for High Holidays again in 2011. As of mid-September, nothing had been organized. Chabad started advertising Rosh Hashanah services in their weekly emails in mid-August.

Some might think that Chabad is responsible for the dismantling of the informal Jewish community. But this is an over simplification and simply incorrect. People move on. People are busy. People change. Chabad has a role to play, and is certainly busy in Cambodia. Rabbi Butman estimates that if current trends continue, he may have to bring on additional Chabad staff within the next two years. And yet… one can’t help but think that if Chabad had chosen not to put a center in Phnom Penh, the informal group would have continued to grow. This is neither good nor bad, right nor wrong. It is a different style of practicing Judaism.

When asked about coming to Cambodia, Rabbi Butman tells the story of his exploratory trip to Cambodia for Pesach in 2009. He and his wife were considering opening a center in California as an alternative to Phnom Penh. He knew that getting Jews to come to his center in California would take more prodding. In Cambodia, he says, the Jews are hungry for something spiritual, which is why the center continues to see constant patrons. “It’s like handing someone who has been wandering in the desert a cold coke,” he explains. “They are happy to have it because they have been without for so long.”
In the Aftermath of Genocide
Jews and Cambodians connect in recent literature

Two recent novels chronicle the stories of Jews who escaped Europe before Kristallnacht, Americanized in an attempt to leave their past behind and built successful careers in the United States. Later in their lives, they were closely connected with Cambodians who too escaped death in the years of terror under the Khmer Rouge, whose reign resulted in the death of approximately two million of their fellow countrymen.

Evelyn Toynton’s novel, The Oriental Wife (Other Press, 2011) is about the attempt to leave the horrors of the past behind. It tells the story of three childhood friends in pre-WWII Nuremberg: Rolf, his best friend Otto, and Otto’s cousin Louisa. The three manage to leave Germany before Hitler takes power, eventually all landing in New York. Rolf has always had a thing for Louisa, but wasn’t brought up to express his emotions, so he keeps his feelings about Louisa to himself.

Finally one night Rolf professes his love for Louisa and becomes a doting boyfriend, fiancé, and husband. He works tirelessly to help Jews back in Germany escape. Without telling Louisa, he pulls strings so her parents can leave Germany. His own father isn’t so lucky, nor is Otto’s. Despite it all, Rolf and Louisa look to the future and hope to leave their past behind. When Louisa learns she’s pregnant, the couple celebrates and plans for the day when their family will grow.

But a terrible accident strikes just as Louisa delivers a healthy baby girl. Louisa is physically debilitated and Rolf can’t bear to look at his once glamorous wife. Louisa turns inward, ashamed at her new inability to perform routine activities like cutting her own food. Rolf all but ignores his wife and doesn’t protest when she volunteers to move into a house for invalids. He divorces her soon after.

Rolf and Louisa’s daughter, Emma, grows into an intelligent young woman who visits her mother every week at the home for invalids. After finding a job in the mid-1970s with a small publisher that works with Cambodian authors, Emma becomes touched by the atrocities in Cambodia. Her boss, a Cambodian émigré, shows a liking to Emma and the two begin an affair that suddenly ends one day when her boss leaves New York without warning. Emma learns that he returns to Paris, where he’d studied at the Sorbonne, for all the reasons her father should have stuck with Louisa.

Like The Oriental Wife, Ayelet Waldman’s latest novel, Red Hook Road (Random House, 2011), also addresses a relationship between a Jew who narrowly escaped Europe and a Cambodian whose parents survived Pol Pot’s Killing Fields. Waldman’s characters form a different kind of bond, one more like grandfather and granddaughter who connect through music and the pasts they escaped.

Emil Kimmelbrod is a world-famous violinist who teaches at Julliard during the academic year and spends his summers at a music institute in Maine. Thanks to his strict German-Czech heritage, he prefers his family to address him as Mr. Kimmelbrod.

And similar to The Oriental Wife, tragedy strikes Mr. Kimmelbrod’s family one early July day when his granddaughter and her new husband are killed in a car accident only an hour after their wedding ceremony. And like Rolf in The Oriental Wife, Mr. Kimmelbrod has a hard time expressing his feelings over his loss and the pain his daughter Iris experiences at the death of her oldest child.

But that’s where the strong German Jewish characters in these stories diverge. Samantha is the daughter of the deceased groom’s relative. A shy pre-teen, adopted as a toddler from Cambodia, Samantha shows an early interest in the violin, which doesn’t go unnoticed by Mr. Kimmelbrod. He teaches Samantha in the summer, but when Kimmelbrod returns to New York for the winter, he arranges for another teacher to instruct Samantha in Maine.

As the years pass and Samantha’s violin abilities advance, Mr. Kimmelbrod and his daughter Iris receive permission from Samantha’s mother to allow the teen to live with them in New York and study violin full-time there.

By the end of the book, Mr. Kimmelbrod can finally feel the emotions — through Samantha’s music — that he’s suppressed for decades. While Samantha’s background is never fully spelled out — something her adopted mother probably never learned in full — it’s assumed that Mr. Kimmelbrod feels somewhat of an allegiance with his student as much for her musical abilities as for her background as a child who escaped a land of genocide. 

BookReviews
by Susan Blumberg-Kason

ASIAN JEWISH LIFE ISSUE 7

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I can recall much of my first visit to the Cochin Jewish Synagogue, which is where I first found a love for the beauty of Hebrew calligraphy. It was years ago when I was a small boy, about 10 years old. I can’t explain why, but I had been insisting that my father take me to the synagogue. I don’t know what the driving force was. While some might say it was something divine for a 10 year-old boy. Perhaps it was just to satisfy my curiosity about what drove so many foreigners to visit my town of Cochin, India.

It was evening, around 6.30pm. The roads leading to Jew Town had begun to be painted in darkness of the night. There were no other people in the street. I think it was a Sunday. The growing curiosity to see this place made each second seem like an hour. At last I reached the quiet of Jew Town junction where the yellowish tint of the streetlight gave the place a distinct look from the other streets of Cochin.

My father parked his bike to one side and we walked. The buildings on both sides of the street seemed to me to be extraordinarily large; the antique shops in the street grabbed my attention. At the synagogue, two unusual lamps stood on either side of the synagogue’s gate and the seemingly random laid rocks in front took me decades back. Even today it feels that I am somewhere back in history when I visit Jew Town.

The gatekeeper told my father that the synagogue was closed to visitors during that time. Someone from the
a school run by Catholics. The school gave me a Gideon's Bible. I took it home and started to turn the pages. There was one page that had a translation of a verse from John in around 25 different languages, including Arabic, Hebrew and German. The Hebrew immediately attracted me. A long time had passed since I had visited the synagogue but this was another moment which helped me connect with Hebrew. I started to learn more and began to imitate the letters. This started my journey with the Hebrew language, already imprinted in my mind.

I wanted to get a copy of a Hebrew Bible for myself to learn from. I purchased a Hebrew book from a street-side bookseller. While it was not a Bible, but rather a daily prayer book, it was a start. That book helped me because one side was Hebrew and other side was its English translation. On the last page there was transliteration of Kaddish Leela (Half Kaddish). This is what actually helped me understand the alphabet and vowels.

After spending long hours up at night, I learned the letters in the aleph-bet and I later realized that some forms of letters were only used at the ending of words. I compared the Hebrew with the Arabic alphabet that I learned in my childhood. This helped me to better understand the Hebrew language. Gradually I learned to write, read and then to understand some of the meaning of the words.

I used a simple fountain pen, pencils, brushes, a shaped quill, a carved bamboo stick and also a calligraphic pen to write Hebrew. One of my friends, Sharon, who knew about my interest in Hebrew, asked me if I had visited the synagogue of Cochin. I had not been back since that night when I was a young boy.

The next day four of us took off for the synagogue on our bicycles. Inside, the synagogue was cool as it is well ventilated. Suddenly the large doors of the synagogue closed as it was time for the caretaker to close it for the night. An old man with a kippah walked along with
LIBERAL JEWISH HIGH HOLIDAY SERVICES COME TO SHANGHAI

Apples and Honey in the Hai!

A new initiative is underway which will offer High Holiday worship services (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) in the spirit of liberal (Reform) Judaism this year in Shanghai. Join us as we celebrate the New Year with like-minded liberal Jews of all backgrounds. Children and non-Jewish partners are very welcome and all activities are free. Pick and choose from a variety of experiences and activities. Services will be conducted by Rabbi Joel Oseran, Vice President, International Development, for the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Rabbi Oseran lives with his family in Israel and develops and strengthens Progressive congregations in emerging communities in Central and Eastern Europe, the Former Soviet Union and other parts of the world. He has traveled extensively in Asia and knows the liberal Jewish communities in Beijing, Singapore and has served as Rabbi for the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong during a sabbatical leave.

For a full list of events and location details please email liberaljewsshanghai@gmail.com RSVP required.

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a lady while explaining the history of the synagogue. The old man opened the Aron Kodesh and showed her the Torah scroll. I looked at the letters and began to pick out words I knew. The old man looked at me with surprise and asked how I learned to read Hebrew.

“Are you a Jew?” he asked me.

“No, I am a Muslim,” I replied.

He asked who taught me Hebrew. I explained that I had learned it on my own. I told him my story of my first visit to the synagogue. He asked me if I was able to read from the Torah. I explained that I was only able to read with the vowels but would be willing to try. I read a small portion out loud. This was enough to impress him.

I was amazed at what I had seen. When I got home that evening I tried to make a replica of the scroll I had looked at but knew I would have to learn some of the rules to be followed. My eagerness energized me and I worked hard all week with the knowledge I had. I took it to the caretaker of the synagogue, Mr. Joy, who introduced me to the warden, Samuel Hallegua. I showed him the miniature replica of the Torah that I had created. He took a great interest in speaking with me and invited me to his home.

We talked about Judaism and the life of Jews in Kerala. We talked about the recent reconstruction of the first mosque of India, Cheraman Juma Masjid, which is situated in Kodungalur. He was a great storyteller and believed in peaceful coexistence and tolerance. I frequently visited him. The last time I saw him, I presented him with an oil painting of a Menorah and a calligraphic piece of the Ten Commandments in Hebrew that I had made for him. He passed away a couple of days before Rosh-Hashanah in September 2009.

Soon after, I met Sarah Cohen, another elderly member of the community. I shared my work with her and she shared a real Cochini Pesach with me during my university break. Sarah aunty explained the Pesach preparations like cleaning the house and stacking the vessels and utensils. Every trip home now I visit with her.

I am not a stranger to the community and the synagogue is now familiar. I am very proud to call Cochin my home.
Once on the Upper West Side, a man saw an Israeli flag button I was wearing, and said, “You Jews are the problem!” Oh, I’m the problem. I work as a social worker in New York City, I love my wife and family, I want to help make the world a better place. I’m the problem? This is the question Jews have been asking themselves for millennia.
Under our chuppah two years ago, I drank from my great-grandfather’s Kiddush cup, one of the few items he chose to take with him in hope of a better life. The Kiddush cup sat in a Brooklyn basement, until, finally, it ended up in the hands of his great-grandson 93 years later…. In some ways, I believe he knew the Kiddush cup would be discovered one day.

The Talmud says, “Where you are supposed to go, your feet will take you.” Today I am truly home as a Jew. But the funny thing is that I never really left home. I have Jewish blood coursing through my veins.
Akira and Ellie Ohiso’s ‘Surviving’ is an artistic and beautifully moving representation of Akira Ohiso’s conversion to Judaism and internalization of the value that, like for all Jews, Jewish survival is now in his hands. Ultimately, the book concludes with Akira passing this value onto the next generation with the birth of his first son, but it is clear that his journey is part of a larger continuum.

Newspaper clippings, family snapshots, graphic art, beautifully drawn vignettes, handwritten letters, photography, Holocaust survivors’ narratives and conversion certificates carry the reader on an extraordinarily rare journey as Akira, a Japanese American, learns while on this journey towards becoming a Jew that his own great-grandfather was Jewish. His great-grandfather’s forgotten Kiddush cup is the only surviving reminder. The reader/viewer steps into his heart and feels what it is like to be a Jew-by-choice and to feel what it is like to discover this amazing connection linking him to the Jewish people. His language is crisp, yet understated and his observations astute. His words are colored by his experience working as a social worker with an aging population of Holocaust survivors that are on the whole isolated, in ill health and living in poverty. ‘Surviving’ is an emotional experience and connection rather than a read.

Akira requires the reader to reexamine what it really means to be a Jew and what our responsibilities are to ensure the survival of the Jewish people. Akira is not a casual observer. He worked hard to be a Jew and to be accepted and he forces the reader to reflect inwardly and to not ever take their Jewish identity for granted. Akira’s journey though is perhaps best summarized by Zaydie, his wife’s grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, “He [Zaydie] explained that he knew I [Akira] was Jewish in my heart and soul, and, therefore, an Orthodox conversion was only the final step in my journey. He said, ‘Akiva (Akira’s Hebrew name), you are Jewish.’”

And even with his Jewish heart and soul, Akira observes, “I grew up with none of the baggage of growing up Jewish, yet I’m starting to accumulate my own set of travel bags….So now when I am persecuted for being Jewish, my processes and reactions are not historic. Yes, I get upset, but I don’t say, ‘This is how it is and how it will always be.’ My baggage is knowledge, not formative structures in my personality or psyche.”

He reflects upon the choices his great-grandfather made in hiding his Judaism to protect his family. “I’ve learned that silence does not lead to good things for Jews.” He promises to teach his son “to be a proud Jew, never to be silent, and to never take his Judaism for granted.”
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