

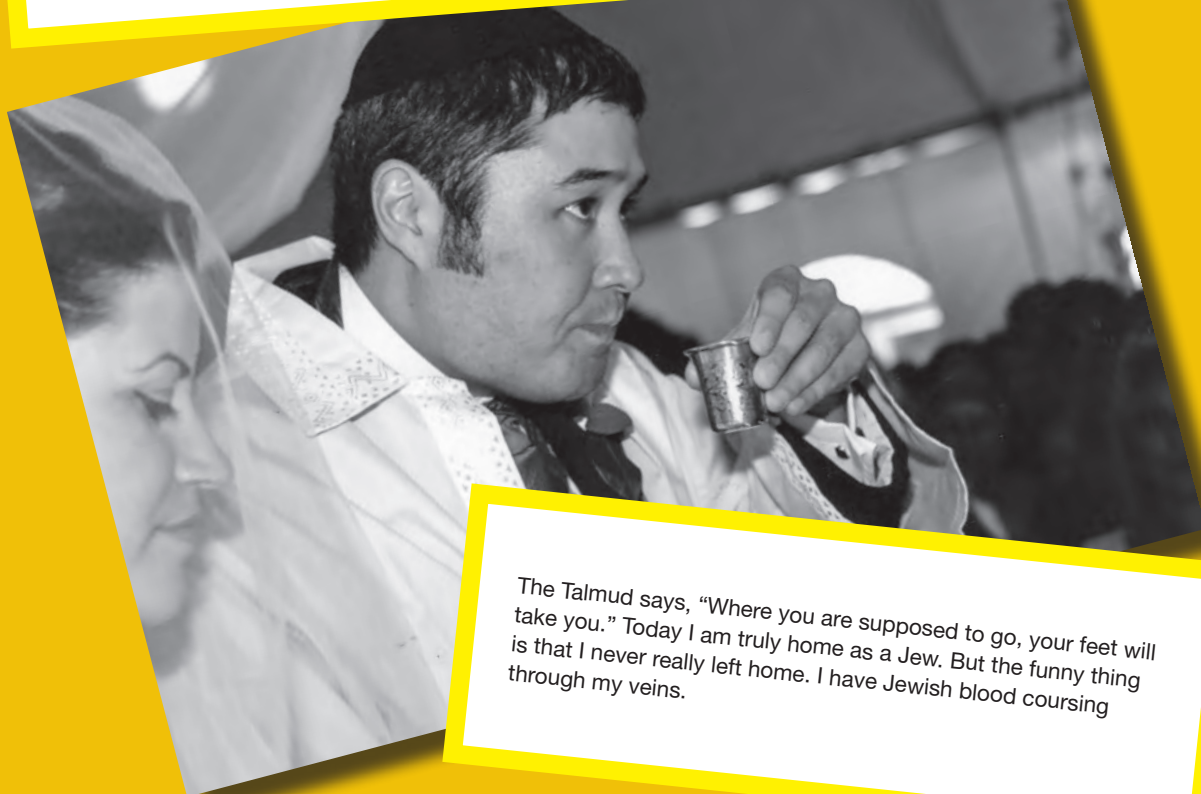


Akira Ohiso on Surviving

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.



If my Japanese father, who was a small boy in Hirohito's Japan during World War II, can sit next to Ellie's Zaydie, a Holocaust escapee from Hungary, at our wedding 60 years after the Holocaust, then anything is possible. If my Japanese relatives can eat gefilte fish with chopsticks at my aufruf, then our world has hope.

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." ✧