Siona Benjamin’s Interviews on Canvas
Faces of the Bene Israel

Secrets of Ceylon
What happened to the Jews of Sri Lanka?

Visit to the IDF Field Hospital in Minami Sanriku
An insider’s view
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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Dear Editor:

Shalom. Many, many thanks for sending copies of the Winter 2010-2011 issue of Asian Jewish Life for our congregation (Kurla Bene Israel Prayer Hall). The magazine is attractive and very interesting with beautiful photography. A pleasant and enjoyable read indeed. A humble suggestion: to consider giving serial numbers to the issues of Asian Jewish Life for easier reference in the future.

Thanking You,

Moses Joseph Rajpurkar
Hon. Treasurer
Kurla Bene Israel Prayer Hall, Mumbai, India

Dear Moses:

Thank you for your suggestion. We agree that it is a great idea to switch to a numeric system and you are not the first person to suggest this to us. This issue will be labeled Issue 6 (June 2011). On our site we will update the electronic editions to reflect the new numbering system. We will adopt this numbering system for all future issues of AJL and dispense with referring to the issues by season. Please look for our next issue, Issue 7 (September 2011).

Thank you again for your input. It is most appreciated.

Kind regards,

Erica Lyons

In Issue 7 (September 2011), Asian Jewish Life will officially announce our new International Advisory Board, drawn from academics and other leaders from the Asian-Jewish world. Please see our next issue for more details.
Dear Readers:

Welcome to the 6th issue of Asian Jewish Life. As I write this letter I am preparing to attend the 2011 ROI Summit in Jerusalem. ROI is a global community, created by Lynn Schusterman, that works towards creating an international network of young Jewish leaders with innovative and diverse paths for connecting to Jewish life.

Living in the Far East, Jews find themselves somewhat ‘off the radar’ and a bit disconnected from the major arteries of Jewish life. The ROI Summit represents an incredible opportunity for Asian Jewish Life to actively engage in conversations and partnerships with global Jewry, outside the limits of the virtual world, and another opportunity to help put Jewish life in Asia on the map.

The massive earthquake and tsunami in Japan temporarily shifted the Jewish world’s focus to this region and we saw Jewish and Israeli organizations take the lead on humanitarian aid efforts. AJL teamed up with eJewish Philanthropy and utilized the eJewish Philanthropy platform to provide first hand information on how the Jewish/Israeli world responded in the aftermath of the quake. Together we highlighted the efforts of organizations that included: American Jewish Committee (AJC), Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), ZAKA, Chabad of Asia and IsraAID. AJL would like to commend all the Jewish and Israeli organizations that contributed to and continue to contribute to the relief work in Japan. These organizations, in addition to providing desperately needed humanitarian aid, continue to make a lasting and positive impression on the Japanese people. They all are the ‘best of Asian Jewish life’.

In this issue, our Best of AJL feature highlights and recaps the work of the IDF in Japan, again, just one of many Jewish world responders. This mission again gives a sense of the importance of Tikkun Olam in our tradition. We also bring you an Expat Diary piece written by Aimee Weinstein of the Tokyo Jewish Community as she struggled with the decision whether to leave Japan and when to return.

Away from Japan, we have also included an array of creative pieces. AJL officially welcomes Allison Heiliczer on board as our Photography Editor and we have chosen to showcase her photography and accompanying poetry in our poetry section. Our Books Editor, Susan-Blumberg Kason, has provided an insightful read of the Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother with a contrast to the educational values discussed in Fortunate Sons. Yes, the debate continues.

We also have included a beautiful piece by Raquelle Azran, Hanoi and Counting. Her work appeared previously in our Spring 2010 issue. Likewise, I have included one of my own Hong Kong-based memoir-type pieces, Holy People in the Taxi. These are both in our Writer’s Desk section.

For the first time, we have a feature focused on the little known Sri Lankan Jewish connection. Australian writer and photo journalist Andrew Harris has contributed photographs and editorial in Secrets of Ceylon - What happened to the Jews of Sri Lanka? As he, more correctly adds, “And did they ever exist.” As for additional little known connections, Dr. Shalva Weil connects Rachel’s Tomb and the Bene Israel for us in The Tomb of Rachel - the Bene Israel Connection. We bring you another look at India’s Bene Israel in the cover story, Siona Benjamin’s Interviews on Canvas- Faces of the Bene Israel.

And surprising, yet true, we offer a look at a new sitcom in the US called Kosher Pig. The show follows a Chinese girl, adopted by a Jewish family, as she searches for her Chinese roots. On a much more serious note, Carice Witte, representing an organization called SIGNAL, out of Israel, will give insight into the Israeli/ Chinese academic connection and explain the importance of this partnership. Though looking towards the future in China, we still are looking back. A Travel Diary piece by Rabbi Mark S. Bloom, gives a tourist’s view of Kaifeng. I hope the addition of a Travel Diary section will give readers a greater opportunity to contribute to Asian Jewish Life.

I hope you enjoy this tour of Jewish Asia!

Erica Lyons
Editor-in-Chief
Secrets of Ceylon

What happened to the Jews of Sri Lanka?
Shabbat at Chabad Colombo. Ceiling fans whoosh languidly overhead, muffling the crowd of us individual daveners; four men—me, a backpacking Israeli father and son, and Rabbi Mendie Crombie—not even half a minyan, working our way through kabbalat shabbat, concluding roughly together. On the other side of the loungeroom mechitzah are the rebbetzin and my wife, Naava. At the only synagogue in the country, this, Rabbi Crombie later tells me, is an above-average turnout.

Rabbi Crombie’s Chabad House is set up to serve the needs of a transient trickle of Israeli backpackers and Jewish businessman who pass through Colombo. It is the only synagogue (and mikvah) in the country. And yet, over many centuries, Sri Lanka has almost certainly had a Jewish presence of some sort — in fact, the southern port of Galle is believed to be the biblical city of Tarshish, from where in 1000BCE King Solomon once shipped elephants, apes, peacocks jewels and spices.

Sri Lanka is an island 432km at its longest, and 224km at its widest. The Sinhalese overwhelmingly Buddhist majority is almost three-quarters of the 20.4-million population, the Tamils — overwhelmingly Hindu; some are Christian — just under a fifth, the Sri Lankan and Indian Moors, who are Muslim, are just under a tenth. About 50,000 Dutch Reform Burghers and 2000 indigenous animist Veddah balance the equation.

Rabbi Crombie, as I, was aware of only one self-identifying Jew, the poetess Anne Ranasinghe, and he couldn’t put me in touch with anyone who could tell me about the synagogue I had heard about in Colombo, long since vanished. He did point me towards a Queensland-based researcher, Dr Fiona Kumari Campbell, whom I’d already tried to contact before going to Sri Lanka.

**Tracing Hidden Jewish Roots**

A couple of days later I sat down with JB Müller, a journalist during the turbulent ‘70s and ‘80s, who has devoted himself to researching the history of his own people — The Burghers — many of whom he believes to have Jewish roots.

Over the course of a long afternoon at the Dutch Burgher Union, a social club, central meeting place, and genealogical storehouse for the Sri Lankan Burghers, JB told me that, fleeing persecution in Europe across two centuries of pogroms, from the 16th century to the 18th century, many Jews had ended up in the Netherlands, particularly in Amsterdam. When the Dutch needed labour to send off to far-flung lands with the Dutch East Indies Company, the Jews were only too happy to go — and much earlier, he argues, the same happened with the Portuguese colonisers, and the surfeit of fled Spanish Jews on Portuguese soil.

As a consequence, he argues, a huge number of Burgher families with Portuguese or Dutch ancestry have Jewish roots. As evidenced, he posits, by their surnames — a list of which he has published in his book, The Burghers, which contains a chapter on the subject, ‘Semitic Ancestors’.

Fiona Kumari Campbell’s mother’s maiden name is ‘Van Dort’, one of those on JB’s list — a ‘nonsense’ surname he explains as. ‘Van Dort’ means ‘Over There’.

I caught up with Fiona on my return to Australia. It turns out that an illustrious Jewish ancestor of hers, Leopold Immanuel Jacob Van Dort, was professor of Hebrew at the Christian Theological Seminary in Colombo 1758 to 1760, the year Hebrew was removed...
from the curriculum. Ultimately forced to convert under Dutch rule in Ceylon, he established a strong relationship with the Cochin Jews, from whom he copied scrolls of communal record.

Jacob Van Dort also translated the Koran into Hebrew (from a Dutch translation of a French translation from the Arabic) – a copy lives in the New York Public library.

Although Fiona hasn’t converted to Judaism, she and her daughter keep a kosher home, and live what she describes as a ‘pretty Jewish life’. She hasn’t undergone the process because of the difficulty of obtaining any certifiable proof of descent. “‘Van Dort’ is a well-known Jewish name. Some of the Van Dorts went to a colony in South America; to Suriname, and retained their Jewish identity.” Fiona’s own ancestors ended up in Sri Lanka with the Dutch East Indies Company. They stayed, and apparently lost their Jewishness. Many generations later, Fiona says her daughter doesn’t know any reality other than being a Jew.

Fiona says JB Müller was the first to put Jews and Burghers together in the Sri Lankan media. “He is to be commended,” she says. Although he tends to work not with hard evidence, but with inferences, Fiona freely admits that hard evidence is difficult to come by.

Roadblocks in the Path

As an academic pursuit, uncovering the Jewish history of Sri Lanka has been fraught. From social and political sensitivities; separating unverifiable stories from documented proof; a number of roadblocks have stood in her path.

“Sometimes the stories that people tell, are conflicting and they’re hazy,” she says. “Remember that these recollections are of people who’ve had very little visual and physical exposure to Jews. That’s a problem in itself.”

The well-known Sri Lankan writer Cecil V Wikramanayake, now in his 80s, published an essay entitled ‘Jews of Old Ceylon’, in which he recalled, “I remember, as a child, seeing many Jews in this country, always dressed in the customary white robe, head covered and kept in place with a phylactery tied around the head.”

Who really knows what he was remembering – both Fiona and the poetess Anne Ranasinghe note that many Sri Lankans think a ‘Jew’ is some kind of Christian. Additionally, an expat Sri Lankan Burgher in Melbourne had told me that what I found later to be a

Photo credit: Andrew Harris

Carved wooden secondary entrance to an old merchant’s house
South Indian Muslim sect, the Bohras, were Jews.

The overarching issue with uncovering evidence of Jews in Sri Lanka is the tumultuous history of the island itself, and its successive waves of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonisation over hundreds of years, followed by a brief, relatively trouble-free period after independence in 1948, and, most recently, three decades of civil war. Every new administration and new strife meant the destruction of documentation, mass flights and displacements of population. “That’s the whole issue with colonisation. They were there to wipe out religious sentiment that they didn’t agree with,” she says. “People lose their connection, their identity.”

Since Fiona published her article ‘A Historical Appraisal of Jewish Presence in Sri Lanka’ on the Chabad of Sri Lanka website, she’s had a trickle of enquiries from people who think they have Jews in their genealogy. “At least it’s opening up a conversation for people who maybe haven’t thought there was some kind of Jewish descent, to start exploring those issues.”

When Chabad of Colombo was first established, Fiona asked whether or not tourists and businesspeople was the entirety of their mission; whether or not they were looking to reconnect those in Sri Lanka who had lost touch with their Judaism, or if they’d work with the descendents of those who were forced to convert. The answer was not in the positive. “I think it’s a moral responsibility; with colonisation, these people didn’t say, oh, I want to convert to another religion,” she says. “They are the legacy of tyranny.”

“I am the Only Sri Lankan Jew”

The poetess Anne Ranasinghe (born Anneliese Katz in Essen, Germany) was initially concerned about the establishment of the Chabad presence; that it would bringing too much attention to bear on Jews in Sri Lanka.

Over a very crackly phone connection, Anne Ranasinghe was resolute. “I am the only Sri Lankan Jew,” she says. “I am the only Jew with a Sri Lankan passport.” And it’s true.

Anne survived the Holocaust after being sent to England as a child. She grew up in London, where she met her Sri Lankan obstetrician husband. On starting a family in Sri Lanka, she decided to raise her children as Buddhist – not as Jewish. According to an essay published in the Jewish Quarterly, ‘Our Beginnings Never Know Our Ends’, Anne explains she had no option. She was culturally and spiritually isolated.

Meanwhile, Anne kept up contact with the few Jews on the island of whom she was aware. One of her Jewish friends, who had married a Sri Lankan, towards the end of her life made it clear to her that she wanted a Jewish burial. In Sri Lanka, most people are cremated,
in accordance with the predominant Buddhist rite; otherwise they’re buried in privately owned Muslim or Christian cemeteries.

The Christian owners of the cemeteries that may have had plots refused to have a Jew buried in the ground. Anne was never able to find a plot for her friend to have a proper Jewish burial.

**The Search for Something Concrete**

Fiona confirms that there was, indeed, a synagogue in Colombo, as does JB, who mentions that it was known as ‘The Rotunda’, after its rounded architecture, a site now known as Rotunda Gardens, a few hundred metres south of where Fiona believes there was a synagogue. Along with many other historical buildings across the country, it did not survive three decades of civil wars and urban development. “There’s not that kind of archaeological sensibility,” Fiona says. This location also doesn’t corroborate with any other evidence.

In the course of our brief conversation, Anne Ranasinghe though confirms that she remembers a synagogue replete with a mezuzah at the site at which Fiona believes it to have existed, opposite the Cinnamon Grand Hotel on Galle Road, in the upscale Cinnamon Gardens neighbourhood, on the grounds of what is now a Japanese cultural hall. The current Chabad House is an art-deco villa not far away.

**“They come, and they disappear”**

Fiona is quick to point out that not only is there no surviving synagogue of the original community, no surviving Portuguese churches and only a few original Dutch sites stand today. “They come, and they disappear.”

In her essay for the Jewish Quarterly, Anne Ranasinghe mentions that Jewish serviceman, in the British army, used the synagogue, and that it was demolished not long after her 1952 arrival in Sri Lanka. She recalls no actual Jewish community, and names in her essay the handful of Jews she was aware of – also mainly the European wives of local men.

Still, despite the question of this vanished synagogue building, there is written evidence of an historical Jewish presence in Sri Lanka – Benjamin of Tudela estimated 3000 Jews in Sri Lanka in 1130; a famously open-minded 9th-century Sinhalese king is recorded as having four Jewish advisers to his court of sixteen in total; a 16th-century Portuguese trader recounts a 50-day trade fair in which he specifies Jews participated; the Jewish de Worms brothers, cousins of the Rothschilds, established the first coffee, and then tea plantations in Sri Lanka; a handful of Jews were senior in the colonial British administration – what happened to their descendents?

“In 1948,” JB Müller tells me, “with the establishment of the State of Israel, they left for Israel, and Singapore.”

Of the permanent, original Singapore Jewish community, only 300 members remain. It’s such a small community, so important in the region; it seemed odd that they wouldn’t know about this. And yet, via email, Rabbi Mordechai Abergel of Singapore’s Jacob Ballas Centre stated clearly, “To the best of my knowledge, there are no Jews in Singapore who migrated from Sri Lanka.”
“I think it is forgotten for those people, it’s gone,” Fiona says of the Singapore Jews. “I think for others, it’s about reawakening the memory.”

Fiona puts the number of self-identifying Jews at about 60, including a Jewish monk of Buddhist descent, and a couple of Sri Lankan writers other than Anne Ranasinghe. No more are willing to be visible, she remarks. “People don’t want their graves dug up because of religious intolerance; people don’t want their houses burned down because of religious intolerance.”

Sri Lanka maintains no diplomatic ties with Israel. An Israeli Legation was set up in 1957, but was expelled by the government in 1971 with the promise of massive Arab aid money as a reward. The Charge de Affairs was dismissed, but no aid arrived. During the initial Israeli tenure, though, Anne Ranasinghe renewed her ties with the Jewish world.

In 1984, needing military hardware to help combat the Tamil insurgency, President Jayawardena established a non-diplomatic Israeli Interest Section at the American Embassy in Colombo. This was later also expelled, at the whim of incoming President Premadasa.

“Eighteen, from memory”

In 2007, Fiona and her daughter spent six months in Colombo. It so happened that the Kanatte (or ‘Borella’) general Christian cemetery was next to the school Fiona’s daughter was attending.

With a hunch that there may be some Jewish graves among the sprawling plots, Fiona, armed with photographs of Jewish graves in lieu of speaking decent Sinhala to explain herself, and images of Hebrew script, marched in, and approached the old caretaker.

“It was like something out of the movies – he went hysterical,” she says. “‘Madam, madam, madam!’ He grabbed the paper, and went off on his bike. He went flying down the middle of the cemetery. ‘Follow me. I have been waiting for someone for years – tell me, what is this writing?’ Fiona told him what the script was, and amid a gathering crowd, the old caretaker took her a scattering of Hebrew- and Yiddish-inscribed Jewish graves, all of which she photographed. “Eighteen, from memory.”

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The Tomb of Rachel - the Bene Israel Connection

Wanderers, emissaries, matriarchs and a holy site
In 1856, Rabbi Yaacov Sapir, an emissary from Eretz Israel, departed on a five-year tour of far-flung Jewish communities, including Yemen, India, Australia and New Zealand. Sapir had been born in Oshmiany near Wilna, but his parents, fired by messianic and religious motivations, had come to Palestine and settled in Safed. Upon his return to Jerusalem from his long mission, he published an amazing detailed travel log, with first-hand descriptions of the life of the Yemenite Jews, as well as the appearance of the pseudo-Messiah Judah ben Shalom. In 1866, he published an invaluable work called “Even Sapir” in which he details all three communities of Indian Jews: the Bene Israel, the Baghdadis who had settled in Bombay (today Mumbai) and Calcutta, and the Cochin Jews.

In 1859, Rabbi Sapir stayed six months in Bombay. He was hosted by the Baghdadi community, but, as opposed to other emissaries, he also visited the poorer Bene Israel, who claimed they had arrived in India in a shipwreck some time around 175BCE. He wrote that he was moved to find out more about the “lost” tribes of Israel “who are called Bene Israel”. The reference was to the ten lost tribes exiled by the Assyrians as Israel, the Baghdadis who had settled in Bombay (today Mumbai) and Calcutta, and the Cochin Jews.

He wrote: “And they knew that there are other Jews and the land of Israel, and Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Temple, and that when the Messiah comes they will be redeemed and gathered together in Jerusalem…and they also give charity and donations to the poor of Israel and to messengers who come from Palestine for this purpose.” Although some scholars believe that he was actually referring to the wealthier Baghdadi Jews in Bombay, who were well-known for giving charity, and were a regular stop for emissaries from Palestine, it is also very probable that he was also writing about the Bene Israel community, who displayed generosity despite their modest means.

One of the causes to which the Bene Israel of Bombay contributed was the Tomb of Rachel. This tomb marks the very spot where the Biblical matriarch Rachel died in childbirth on the road to Bethlehem. In the Book of Genesis (35:19-20) it is written: “And Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel’s grave unto this day.” Muhammad al-Idrisi, the 12th century Muslim geographer confirmed that: “On the road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem is the Tomb of Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin.”

The tomb has been the site of pilgrimage and prayer for Jews in the Diaspora for more than three thousand years. Throughout the centuries, Jews from all over the world visited the tomb, and sent funds to help renovate and maintain it. It was such a revered site that even Jews in far-flung countries, as far away as India, longed to pray there and felt connected to the place.

However, as with many Jewish religious sites, and particularly with respect to tombs of patriarchs, prophets and great Rabbis, the site also had religious significance for members of other faiths. This was particularly well documented in the 15th century with descriptions of Jews, Muslims and Christians frequenting the place. In 1615, Muhammad, Pasha of Jerusalem, gave the Jews exclusive rights to the tomb. In 1830, the Ottomans recognized the legal rights of the Jews to the site. When Sir Moses Montefiore purchased the site in 1841, he restored the tomb and added a small prayer hall for Muslims. When Rabbi Yaakov Sapir left Jerusalem, emissaries were collecting money for the renovation of the tomb.

It appears that Rabbi Sapir was successful in fund-raising in India for the holy site. Inscribed on the wall of Rachel’s tomb is the following plaque: “This well was made possible through a donation from our esteemed brothers, the Bene Israel, who dwell in the city of Bombay, may the Lord bless that place. In honour of the whole congregation of Israel who come to worship at the gravestone for the tomb of our matriarch Rachel, may her memory rest in peace, amen! In the year 5625.” This lunar year is the equivalent of 1864, the year that Rabbi Sapir returned to Jerusalem from India.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, while Jewish art in Palestine portrayed Rachel’s tomb as one of the most important holy sites, the site also began to be coveted by Muslims and became a source of contention, with the Wakf demanding control of the place on the grounds that the tomb was part of a neighbouring Muslim cemetery. After the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, the tomb was allocated to Jordan and Jews could no longer visit. During the Six Day War in 1967, after Israel occupied the West Bank (previously Jordanian territory), the tomb once again became part of Israel. During the 1970’s, when I used to visit the tomb, the keeper of the small tomb was a Bene Israel Indian Jew from Bombay, who felt an historical affinity with the site because of his forefathers.

In 1995, after the Oslo agreement, Bethlehem, with the exception of Rachel’s tomb, became part of the Palestinian Authority. The following year, the Israel Defense Forces, fearing a terrorist attack at the site, built a huge fortification around the previously modest tomb. In retaliation, in 1996, the Palestinian Authority declared the place to be on Palestinian land, stopped
referring to it as Rachel’s tomb and made the claim that it was the site of an Islamic mosque.

During the second Intifada in 2000, there were intermittent attacks on the tomb with altercations between the IDF and Palestinian gunmen. Since then, there has been a growing wave of support for the idea that the site was in fact a thousand year-old mosque by the name of the “Bilal ibn Rabah mosque” until, finally, the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) endorsed the idea. In October 2010, it was declared a mosque. Out of 58 member states, only the United States voted against the decision; 12 European and African countries abstained.

In a petition to UNESCO initiated on the internet, petitioners wrote: “In attempting to sever the Jewish cultural, religious and natural heritage bond with the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Rachel’s Tomb, UNESCO denies the history it is mandated to preserve, engages in a political maneuver designed to weaken a member UN nation, and undermines its own principles. … We demand that UNESCO, whose purpose it is to protect heritage, also protect Jewish heritage, rather than deny it.”

The tomb was even known by the Bene Israel of Bombay as one of the holiest sites to Jews over the generations even though they were disconnected from world Jewry. It symbolized fertility, and is of special significance to Jewish women. Rachel’s birthday, which falls on the 11th day of the lunar month of Heshvan, has become a day of pilgrimage for thousands of Jewish women, who come from all over Israel to pray for their loved ones or themselves.

Busloads of Bene Israel have in the past visited the tomb to make vows and pray for suitable marriage partners for their children or beg for children for a childless couple. The Bene Israel groups who visit the tomb today, which now more closely resembles a fortification marking the checkpoint to Bethlehem more than an ancient holy site, are few and far between. The Bene Israel guard is no longer there. The memory, though, is still closely guarded. 

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Dr. Shalva Weil is a Senior Researcher at the Research Institute for Innovation in Education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. She is a specialist in Indian Jewry and is the Founding Chairperson of the Israel-India Cultural Association.
New Released!
Countdown Watch Series

Countdown Watch is a special designed watch series that the watch runs anti-clockwise. It intends to remind us that the day of God’s coming is near. Hebrew alphabets of dial are specially designed to remind us — Pray for Israel!

We wish that Hatikva, Countdown Watch will be a reminder of your promise to God. May God bless you!

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Childhood in China

In a sea of Chinese,
awaiting my visa.
Two hours pass,
a sweet ounce of childhood
Dances around me.
Running with red dragons;
she radiates golden light.
I observe from my seat;
she from her heart.
Transported to my Chinese childhood,
the girl dances.

Photo credit: Allison Heiliczer
Allison Heiliczer is a Hong Kong-based photographer whose photography has appeared in Condé Nast Traveler, Matador, InTravel and Big World Magazine. She holds a bachelor’s degree in nutrition and food studies, and a master’s in cultural studies and management, both from New York University. She is about to begin her graduate studies in psychotherapy. Her work may be viewed at: www.allisonheiliczer.com

**Poetry**

by Allison Heiliczer

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**Pesach in Burma**

To the synagogue,
my Jewish soul floats.
Military marches,
heart expires.
Burmese energy,
pulse on fire.
Passing over perceived gates,
fly, receiving our fates.
Pesach arrives in Rangoon.

---

Photo credit: Allison Heiliczer
Thirty eight motorbikes, ten bicycles, seven cars.

When I first came to Hanoi, eleven years ago, the bicycle reigned supreme. Motorbikes were a luxury and cost two years of hard labor. One evening, we heard a commotion in the courtyard we shared with fifty local families. A thief had attempted to steal a neighbor’s motorbike. He was pinned down, kicked and beaten until the policeman, who had been summoned to take him away, took pity on him and hauled him off to jail.

Behind me shimmers Hoan Kiem lake. The legendary giant turtle swims up from its murky depths and lumbers onto the grassy bank only once or twice a year. Whoever is lucky enough to see it will enjoy hanh phuc, good fortune. I was on my way to the post office several years ago when I saw people swarming excitedly toward the lake. I ran too, and there it was, purply green and enormous. In Vietnam, legends and life are often indistinguishable.

Fifty three motorbikes, nineteen bicycles, twelve cars and four taxis. The number of cars in Hanoi is increasing geometrically, although female automobile drivers are still rarer than snow during the monsoon.

Walk/don’t walk signs blink at most corners, but in Vietnam, their message is purely theoretical. Pedestrians are the lowest rung on the traffic ladder, and must weave through streams of speeding vehicles while constantly looking left and right – think of watching a live tennis match – to avoid being knocked down. It’s easy to identify a tourist in Hanoi: s/he’s the one pawing nervously at the curb. After awhile, you get the hang of it and it’s fun until whoops, you forget to look both ways and a motorbike driver snarls at you, or thuds into you, or both.

I celebrated my first day in Vietnam flat on my face in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). The overland crossing from Phnom Penh, Cambodia was a deadening eight hour trip by shared taxi on rutted roads. We were five people in the back seat, four in the front, of an ancient vehicle. The driver honked at everything that moved including bicycles and ducks, so the trip was basically one unending honk. Finally arriving at my hotel, I should have showered and gone to bed, but instead went outside, tried to cross the street and was promptly mowed down by a motorbike.

After regaining consciousness and checking for contact lenses and teeth, I noticed a worried looking man hovering. He’s the motorbike driver, I was told, you really should apologize to him. He could get in a lot of trouble for running
over a tourist. I apologized, he gallantly forgave me and a tiny scar under my left eyebrow accompanied me for many years before disappearing under a convenient wrinkle.

Eighty motorbikes, ten bicycles, five cars and a lone cyclo. Cyclos, relics of French colonialism, once wound leisurely everywhere in Hanoi.

Drivers pedaled away on their bicycles pushing attached carriages piled high with entire families, great bolts of silk and the marketing. When it rained, a sheet of plastic was tucked around the passengers to keep them dry and in the fierce midday sun, an accordion canopy was opened for shade. Cyclos were once king of the road, but the Hanoi authorities have decided they slow down traffic and are bad for the city’s modern image, so the downtown area is now off limits to them.

You can still find low-tech transport near the marketplaces. Cyclo drivers ring their bells, looking for business. A peddler walks his bicycle, which he has outfitted with display cases. Over the front wheel are hammers, pestles and knives. The back wheel displays rope, pins and ribbons.

Market women, straining under 25 kilo baskets balanced from a pole across their shoulders, offer sugar cane and oranges. Another cyclo passes, twenty chicken heads peeping out of their bamboo cages.

A silver-haired orange seller points to her pyramid of fruit. Very sweet, she insists, and pushes an orange into my hand. No, I say, I really don’t need any oranges. No problem, she smiles, peering into my face. How old are you? Fifty. You look young, she says. Here, we’re old at fifty. Are you sure you don’t want to buy my oranges? 

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.
Message from the Chairman of the
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Siona Benjamin’s Interviews on Canvas

Faces of the Bene Israel
When artist Siona Benjamin, an American, set out on her trip back to the India of her childhood in 2010, she arrived with an intense sense of purposefulness heavily laden with nostalgia. She was intent on rescuing the stories and narratives of these people, her people, the Jews of India. Benjamin was awarded the Fulbright Senior Scholar Fellowship 2010-11, which enabled her to embark on this four month intensive research study in India that allowed her to photograph, interview, and record the Bene Israel’s stories lest they fall into oblivion. She concentrated her work on the Jews living in higher concentrations in Mumbai, Thane and Pune (though once three distinct groups of Indian Jews, the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Iraqi Jews, also lived in concentrated numbers in Cochin, Calcutta, Delhi and in small towns along the coast near Mumbai).

The story of the Jews in India goes back 2,000 years and is one of peaceful coexistence in a colorful world that embraced them yet one of isolation from global Jewry. With the establishment of Israel, many of the Bene Israel began to understand that they had a hunger to connect with world Jewry. Benjamin explains that today the community, mainly as a result of migration to both Israel and the United States, has dwindled and estimates that a mere 4,000 remain in India. Many people, amidst growing concerns over the safety of India’s tiny Jewish minority, the reality of economic tensions, the ease of travel in a global world and the decreasing number of Jewish educational and social opportunities within the Jewish community in India, expect these numbers will continue to dwindle. For Benjamin, the tragedy would be for this community to become a mere footnote in Jewish history. “I have concerns of what would become of the Bene Israel Jews and my Jewish past for my daughter’s generation. I fear there would just be memories.”

As a Bene Israel herself, she explains how she is often asked about the community: what did they look like, what did they sound like. Her “Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives” is a chance to immortalize these stories on canvas, virtually unknown to what is thought of as ‘mainstream’ global Jewry, in other words, the predominantly European-centered Jewry. Benjamin identifies herself as a multi-cultural artist, glossing
her work with her now very American outlook while painting with a palette that is very much out of India, foreign, mysterious and exotic. All the while, the voices of these images leap from the canvas with words that are deeply spiritual and clearly Jewish. The images are most defiantly strong and feminine. To say, though, that she is only one of these things, a woman artist, a Jewish artist, an American artist or an Indian artist would be an injustice. Each stroke is all of these identities woven together. She relies heavily on narrative, myth and history in her work and draws on her own identities as well as the identities of the cultures around her. Having roots that have never been firmly planted, she paints rather from a “spiritual borderland”.

In addition to this, Benjamin’s expressed desire is to document the faces, heritage and stories of the Bene Israel, “before their existence becomes a cultural relic of India”. Benjamin also aims to raise awareness of this 2,000 year history of Jews in India. She wants people to understand, through her art, both the impact India had on them and the impact they have had on India and to open viewers up to a very different face of Judaism. Lastly, and highly personal, Benjamin, in returning to her ancestral home and the home of her childhood, wishes to further explore the theme of home that runs through her earlier works. As she explains, “the desire to find ‘home’, spiritually and literally, has always preoccupied me.”

Understandably, with this type of sensitivity, a common theme running through all of Benjamin’s works is the idea of finding home. She has lived as a minority in India, surrounded by a predominantly Muslim and Hindu population. And as a foreign-born Indian Jew in America, she finds herself within a small minority in the Jewish world. Her art is a roadmap to her home. “Visualizing the Bene Israel Jewish faces and the painted ornamentation around them, they could be the ghost images from my past, my childhood in Jewish India, weaving new and old stories. Are these faces from dreams and memories or are they just other faces on passports or immigration cards or perhaps from my family’s photo albums? These faces would be like maps, leading me to link the past, weave narratives, trace paths and blur boundaries,” Benjamin muses.

In order to achieve her goals, Benjamin is relying on a number of mediums and techniques. While she has returned from her research-focused phase in India, which took her back to places like Magen Hassidim Synagogue and the Tifereth Israel Synagogue, where she worshiped with her family as a child, she has a tremendous task at hand. Now armed with a series of photographs, video tapes and highly personal interviews
that have captured the intense interplay between myth, legend, tradition, history and modernity that these people carry, she has to interpret this ‘data’ and convert it to graphic art. Between ten to fifteen faces that she has captured through her photographs will be printed and converted to cutout portraits on 3’ x 3’ canvases. Benjamin will then paint their individual and collective stories in a narrative form around memorializing their unique perspective, history and traditions.

Benjamin will utilize her signature mastery of the Indian/Persian miniature painting technique with gouache and 22-karat gold leaf, which is prominent in her earlier works, to weave in their stories and iconography. As Benjamin expresses, this miniaturist technique “would best represent the cultural aesthetics of India, while the large cut out portraits would be inspired by the oversized portrait paintings of the contemporary artist, Chuck Close.”

Benjamin says ultimately it was the terror attack in Mumbai’s Chabad House that actually prompted her to begin this celebration of diversity in an effort to bring, to the West, an understanding of who the Jews of India are and to help people understand that the Jewish presence in India predated, by millennia, Chabad’s current presence there. Benjamin is determined to use her art and these faces to offer a much broader view of the Indian Jewish world.
One of the most controversial books this year, Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Penguin, 2011) is known for its portrayal of a strict mother who stresses academics and music above everything, including playdates, sports, and other extracurricular activities.

But little has been made of the common Chinese-Jewish family dynamic Chua describes early on in her memoir. According to Chua, this group “may sound exotic but actually forms a majority in certain circles, especially in university towns.”

In her case, she and her husband agree to teach their kids Mandarin and raise them Jewish. Later in her memoir, Chua briefly recounts when her eldest daughter, Sophia, has her Bat Mitzvah at their home. At that time, Chua’s mother-in-law was suffering from leukemia and living with them. Holding the Bat Mitzvah at their home allows grandma Popo to attend. She passes away two weeks later.

It’s not until her younger daughter Lulu gets ready for her own Bat Mitzvah that Chua discusses how she and her husband share in Lulu’s Bat Mitzvah preparations. She writes “As with Sophia, we were being unconventional and having the Bat Mitzvah in our home. Jed handled the major responsibilities, but I was the one constantly haranguing Lulu to practice her haftorah portion—I was going to be a Chinese mother even when it came to Hebrew.” (page 199)

What makes Lulu’s Bat Mitzvah even more unconventional is that Chua asks Lulu to perform “Hebrew Melody” on the violin at her Bat Mitzvah. And in true Tiger Mother fashion, Chua pushes Lulu to perfection. Tensions rise so high that Chua isn’t sure Lulu will agree to play “Hebrew Melody” when she wakes up the morning of her Bat Mitzvah. Fortunately for Amy Chua, Lulu’s bat mitzvah goes off without a hitch, but not without a tiger’s share of tension.

As strict as Chua appears in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, her original ideas about education and extracurricular activities stand in contrast to the intellectual elite in China 150 years ago.


Their book opens with the annual Yale freshman-sophomore football game in the fall of 1850. Freshman Yung Wing captures the ball toward the end of the game and runs like a typhoon, his long braided queue swaying as his Chinese robes fan in the wind. He kicks the ball for a field goal, seizing a victory and feels American for the first time.

As Leibovitz and Miller write in *Fortunate Sons*, recreational activities become important to university education back in nineteenth century American universities. And it’s this aspect of their education that makes such an impression on Yung Wing, the first person from China to study in the US.

Yung Wing learns English in missionary schools in China before embarking on his university years at Yale. But he flunks calculus and barely passes Greek while at Yale. These subjects involve more critical thinking than simply reciting the Confucian classics.

After Yung Wing returns to China with an undergraduate degree from Yale, he struggles to find a place in the country he left behind as a teenager. Eventually he moves back to Connecticut to supervise a group of 120 Chinese male high school and university students in the late 1870s. The students sail to San Francisco, see firsthand how the Chinese built the transcontinental railroads, visit important historical cities, and then settle in to begin their studies on the east coast.

*Fortune Sons* tells the stories of these students and their overseer Yung Wing all while narrating the rapid changes in late-Qing and early-Republic China. As long as Yung Wing has support back in China, the study abroad program in the US is safe.

Sadly, the mission is aborted prematurely after the program’s patron in China is stripped from his position of authority. Without another supporter and with increased anti-western sentiment during the Boxer Rebellion, the program comes to a sudden halt. All students must return to China, although one stays back in the US to marry a local woman. But among those who return to China, many land in top government, military, and industry jobs.

Leibovitz and Miller’s book is fascinating in that it shows how a balanced education, including physical education and critical thinking, paved the way for modern China. And as Amy Chua learns at the end of her memoir, a well-rounded student is not such a bad thing after all.
The streets of Hong Kong’s Wan Chai district are bustling with traffic. Yet people seem to be entirely oblivious to the cars and wander across streets pushing rickety carts piled with colored plastic house-wares, flattened old cardboard boxes and the occasional pile of dead pigs with wobbly flesh. Shirtless men run across the street carrying plastic buckets filled with water and eels attempting escape. They splash murky water as they run. Old ladies over-laden with dozens of colored plastic bags with recent wet-market purchases shuffle around the people crowded in open air shops haggling over the price of animal parts I care not to try to identify. The shouts of street vendors fill even the quiet space inside the taxi. The taxi cab jerks as it continuously stops for the pedestrians as they stream to and from the bustling street market. It is hard to believe that in less than 5 minutes, if we can just navigate through the wet-market crowd, we will be in Central where the streets glitter and ultra-modern skyscrapers reflect the images of the endless array of chic couture shops that align street level.

The taxi cab driver makes small talk. I try to appear busy with my blackberry but it does not deter him. “Where you from?” he asks. “Live Hong Kong, eight years,” I respond.

I have learned to simplify my speech, removing all ‘extra’ parts of speech, especially prepositions which entirely fail to exist in my taxi cab lingo. I am concise, perhaps a bit terse. In transit, my eight year old has often asked me why my English is so bad, as I break every grammatical rule I have ever drilled into her: “Make right”, “Make left” with an occasional Lido (here) or Do (Road) sprinkled in.

“What country you come from?” he clarifies.

“United States,” I hesitantly offer. Fortunately, in Hong Kong, unlike other places I have traveled to, this usually does not inspire tirades, but rather sometimes an occasional footnote that they would like to go, their brother has been or they saw one or another American television show.

American,” he insists glancing at me in the rearview mirror. I look quizzical.

Don’t look American? This is one of the strangest comments I have heard. What does an American look like I wonder? I think of the faces that make up the America I know. They are diverse. They are colored. They are white. They look like any of the jean-clad Asians on the passing street. They look like the occasional Western tourist being shoved along with a crumpled map in hand in the rush hour frenzy. I certainly fit somewhere in that patchwork. When strangers try to guess my nationality, Italian, French and American all certainly make it to the top three. He sees my perplexed expression.

“No Blond. No ponytail,” he responds.

“Watches too much Beverly Hills 90210. Too much Bay Watch,” I think to myself.

“Who are your people? Where your people come from?” he asks.

I should just ask him where he thinks I am from, agree and end the conversation.

There is in fact no easy answer. As my great-grandparents fled the pogroms of Eastern Europe and divorced themselves of any connection to the Old World once they arrived in Ellis Island, to say I am Russian would be absurd. They weren’t Russians. I am certainly not. They lived in a shtetl, spoke Yiddish and dreamed of the day they could flee from persecution.

Traffic is at a standstill. I could respond Russia though and just end this conversation. I should.

“I am Jewish,” I respond.

“The Jesus. The Jesus. The Jesus?” he says as he bobs his head with his hands pressed together.

Again, I can agree and end the conversation here. I notice the small Buddha statue on his dashboard, placed between the eclectic display of gumball machine-type trinkets, miniature taxis and the golden cat with the one arm that bobs up and down as the taxi cab totters on the old cable car tracks.


“Youtai (Chinese word for Jewish),” I hesitantly offer.

He abruptly removes his hands from the wheel and turns completely around to look at me.

“So lucky,” he sings. “I never before have the Holy People in my taxi. Never before. So lucky, lucky.”

“Not THAT lucky,” I remonstrate. “Turn around! Please! Put hands back on wheel.”

For a second he returns his hands to wheel and looks at the road ahead.

But again, he lets go and turns completely around to look at me.


I assure him again that I am not so lucky. Rules of the road and basic properties of physics are very much still in effect, even in my presence.

Truth be told, I would actually very much like to continue this conversation and wish that we both had the communication skills to do so. So many interesting preconceived notions have come up somewhere between Johnston Road, Wan Chai and Queens Road, Central. He has a definite idea of what Americans look like, which apparently I don’t fit nor do most of the people I know, and although he has never met a Jew before he also has a very detailed perception of Jewish characteristics. I am wearing ripped jeans, converse sneakers and obviously only possess the ability to speak about 15 word of his language despite the fact that I have lived here for 8 years, yet I am now in his mind clearly both wealthy and smart.

We are approaching my stop. “Lido (here),” I shout as he excitedly chatters in Cantonese into the headset connected to one of the five phones he has attached with rubber bands to his dashboard. He simultaneously chatters over the static to the dispatcher. I assume he is busy spreading the news of his good fortune.

Again, “Lido! Stop here,” I shout to get his attention. He abruptly stops. With my open wallet in hand, I look at the meter. He places his hand over the numbers and turns around and smiles.

“No charge for you. So lucky, lucky for me. Holy People in my taxi.”
Visit to the IDF Field Hospital in Minami Sanriku
An insider’s view

Photo credit: Hannah Rosenfeld
It was early in the morning on April 5th when I had the opportunity to witness firsthand the impact the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) mission had on the lives of the Japanese. These were people among the most severely affected by the tsunami. It was also a look at the power and potential of organized cooperation in the Jewish world.

I left the safety of Tokyo and met Israeli Ambassador Ben-Shitrit in Sendai and followed him to Minami Sanriku, the town in which the IDF field hospital is located. Upon arriving at the field hospital at approximately 8:30 a.m., we were met by Dr. Ofer Merin and other key staff members who, despite a busy schedule, graciously took the time to explain the field hospital operations and the role the field hospital plays in the affected area.

Minami Sanriku is a coastal fishing town located in northern Miyagi Prefecture. Prior to the earthquake and tsunami, Minami Sanriku had a population of approximately 18,000 people of which it is estimated that approximately 1,200 individuals perished in the disaster with another 5,500 people being left homeless. The destruction and devastation that I witnessed in Minami Sanriku was utter and complete. The town simply no longer exists. The scene is difficult to describe in words but it looked as though a bomb had destroyed the area.

The IDF field hospital team arrived in Minami Sanriku on Monday, March 28th and began its operations that very same day. The field hospital, located on the outskirts of Minami Sanriku adjacent to a gymnasium that is being utilized as an evacuation shelter, has a staff that includes thirteen doctors, seven nurses and approximately thirty support/logistics members. Specialist services provided include ENT, internal medicine, gynecology, obstetrics, ophthalmology, orthopedics, pediatrics and urology. The hospital also provides x-ray imaging and is equipped with an intensive care unit, medical laboratory and pharmacy with medication available to treat an extensive array of illnesses and diseases. The IDF practitioners work in close consultation with local Japanese doctors and this alone is extraordinary. In many cases the local Japanese doctors accompany their patients to the field hospital. As of the morning of April 5th, the IDF field hospital staff had treated approximately 130 patients on site and an additional number of individuals in the surrounding area either in their home or in an evacuation shelter.

The IDF practitioners provide a vital service to the affected community and the equipment donated by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), including a portable ultrasound unit, an endoscope, and LumiView (head lamp with amplifier) also plays a critical role in enabling them to do so. In many cases, the care they provide is otherwise not available within a two hour radius of the field hospital. For patients with chronic conditions and pregnant patients, this service is critical.
As of April 5th, Dr. Moshe Pinkert, an IDF obstetrician together with Iris Bedrak, an IDF midwife, have used the portable ultrasound to examine fifteen pregnant women, twelve of whom were examined in their own home. According to Eriko Takahashi, a midwife at Minami Sanriku’s Shizugawa Public Hospital, which was destroyed by the tsunami, local authorities have been able to confirm the whereabouts of twenty pregnant women in the Minami Sanriku area since the disaster. Accordingly, as of April 5th, the portable ultrasound has been used in conjunction with the examination of 75% of the pregnant women in the area.

The portable ultrasound gives Dr. Pinkert and Iris Bedrak the ability to examine not only the patient’s physical condition but to also provide the pregnant mother with a large degree of comfort and relief knowing that her unborn child is fine after all of the strain and anxiety of the past several weeks. In the words of Eriko Takahashi, “When visiting patients at their home, Dr. Pinkert and Iris have brought joy to entire families by giving them the chance to share in the experience of seeing the healthy fetus, which under normal circumstances they would not be able to do as a family. Children are clapping as they, their parents and grandparents, see the ultrasound images and share in this wonderful experience.”

The work the IDF field hospital team has performed in Minami Sanriku has been extraordinary, not only in terms of the actual medical care delivered but also in terms of the understanding and goodwill that it has engendered with the Japanese people. This is not a tie that will be forgotten. As Dr. Ofer Merin told me, “The importance of the delegation goes beyond the number of patients treated; it goes to the heart of the relationship between countries. It is a milestone to be able to work in Japan and to assist the people of Japan, and it is a privilege for me to be part of it.”

Philip Rosenfeld has lived and worked in Japan for sixteen years. He is the Vice President and Treasurer of The Jewish Community of Japan and is the Co-Founder and Managing Director of JapanQuest Journeys, a boutique firm specializing in customized luxury journeys to Japan. He is currently serving as The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee’s representative in Japan.
Experiencing the Exodus
(from Japan)

“May all who are hungry come and eat with us.” As Jews we say these words from the traditional Haggadah during the first two nights of Passover every year, but this year, they rang especially true for me and my family as we muddled through the events surrounding the Japan earthquake and subsequent tsunami.

By the time Passover came along over a month later, we were grateful for the chance to celebrate.

Though I am an American I live in Tokyo, Japan with my husband and two children. We have been here for quite a long time – six of the past eight years, and we really do consider it home. The kids attend an international school that attracts children from all over the world. We as foreigners are a part of the landscape, but we remain external – not directly part of the culture. Japan is a homogeneous society and while foreigners are welcome, it is not easy to blend in. Like the Jews of yore creating their shtetls, we live in a “gai-jin ghetto” – a ghetto for foreigners.

That being said, Tokyo is still an easy city in which to live as a foreigner. We joke that living in central Tokyo like we do, is just like living in Manhattan, only it’s clean, safe, and quiet. Orderliness is a part of the Japanese ethos. On escalators, everyone stands on the right side, with room on the left for passing. No one jaywalks and even though there are no trash cans visible on the sidewalks, there’s never any trash either. Japanese people follow rules.

Then, the big earthquake hit. At first, panic. But the Japanese people are calm by nature – unflappable, so we went with it. In the immediate aftermath, life didn’t seem so abnormal.

Sure, my son’s basketball practice was cancelled, as was the kids’ Sunday school, and our pre-Purim party, but soccer practice went on as normal. We met friends to play in the park and go out for lunch to a favorite restaurant. The sun shone and it was nearly 60 degrees all weekend. However, we were rolling with the aftershocks; we waited on the gas lines; and we shopped early in the day so we could stock up. We cried for the people of Northern Japan and listened to the news when possible.

The following Tuesday morning at about 5am, there was another earthquake that, even though it only measured 4.0, was right under Tokyo, and felt much larger. Then we got the grim news about the nuclear reactors. By 3pm we were on a flight to the U.S. Was it the right decision? We’ll never know; but it was the right decision for our family and we were by no means alone. There were hundreds of people at the airport about to create a Japan diaspora – a diaspora of multi-national foreigners all displaced from Japan. The idea was dizzying.

We spent the better part of five weeks watching and waiting. Will the Japanese get the nuclear situation under control? What is the real situation with radiation in the food and water? Will there be food deliveries in Tokyo? Will there be extended blackouts in the city, and if so, will they affect our house? An entire Japan diaspora of Americans in America asked themselves these questions.
We were still in the US when Passover rolled around. Since we live across the globe from family, we took the opportunity to have a Seder with my family in New York, including my grandmother, who is 89 years old and as feisty as ever. My daughter, Sydney, age 8, asked the four questions with some help from her older brother, just as she had done the year before in Tokyo. We drank four cups of wine and we opened the door for Elijah, just as we had done every year in Tokyo.

There were complications involved with having made the decision to leave Japan. Not only were the Japanese nationals unhappy with our decision, but so were other foreigners who had decided to stay. The Japanese term for foreigner is “gaijin.” We were now referred to as “fly-jin.” This senseless judgment made me ache inside. I had tried to make the best decision possible for my family, and people who did not agree with me were denigrating me. It was never that I didn’t love Japan. It was a bit of fear, a bit of familial pressure, and a big dose of two children unoccupied for two weeks that tipped the scales as I agonized over the decision to stay or go. I don’t feel the need to defend what I did, but the idea that my actions call for disparaging remarks, saddens me.

I am now back home in my lovely little house in Japan. The food is plentiful; the water is safe and the people are stoic. I didn’t have to wander for forty years like my ancestors did in the desert, but my road back home was long. My faith and my family sustain me, as they should in times of crisis. It may sound trite, but I do pray for Japan and its people.

The lessons of Passover resonate even more than usual this year. Love thy neighbor; take strangers into your home when they are needy; teach your faith diligently unto your children. Now we are slaves; next year may we be free men. This year in New York; next year in Jerusalem (or Tokyo).
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In early 2010, I met Zhang Yangjia, a graduate student in economics from Nanjing University who was preparing a presentation for a class on the development of the Israeli economy since the state's beginnings in 1948.

She wanted to learn how this small, distant country, born of seemingly nothing, had quickly developed to have first-rate welfare, healthcare, education, and financial institutions. She wanted to place the statistics and numbers in their proper context to understand this apparent miracle. She was thirsty for knowledge, but even with the university library and internet research tools at her disposal, her ability to research was limited due to sparse availability of books, publications and articles in Chinese. My personal inquiries over the years have revealed that indeed, into 2010, there remains a dearth of reliable Chinese language source material on Israel and the Jewish people.

Yangjia is part of a growing trend of young Chinese academics and business people professionals who desire to learn more about the Middle East in general and Israel in particular. As China becomes a more active player in Middle East affairs, starting with energy negotiations and expanding to regional stability and other diplomatic issues, Chinese academics and scholars have recognized the prerogative of enhancing their knowledge of Israel.

The recent publication in Chinese of Dan Senor and Saul Singer's best-selling book Startup Nation then sparked the curiosity of China's entrepreneurial-minded community. Would-be innovators seem eager to learn how a country lacking natural resources and hampered by a 63-year-long ongoing conflict with many of its neighbors could achieve such high levels of success.

Since 1985 the number of Chinese institutions invested in teaching Jewish studies has steadily grown. Today in China there are nine centers dedicated to Jewish studies, hosting classes on Hebrew language, Talmudic studies and Rabbinic literature. Of these, only one, the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai,
touches on matters pertaining to the state of Israel. Today there are about 150 Chinese students studying in Israeli universities, a number which is projected to grow significantly over the next few years.

Despite the strong increase in student and academic demand to understand this small nation with 7.5 million Jewish, Muslim and Christian citizens, basic resources to develop a comprehensive understanding of Israel are unavailable in Chinese. A plethora of books on the Jewish people, Jewish civilization and the secrets of Jewish money-making tactics appear on bookshelves in China. However, the number of materials published on the modern state of Israel can be counted on one hand. This also holds true for online sources. Although news items regularly appear in Chinese media on the Arab-Israeli conflict, analysis of Israel’s historical underpinnings and a broader view of Israeli society are scarce.

While trade and business development between China and Israel continue to forge ahead, there is poor understanding of each other’s culture, history and even political systems. Such imbalances could hamper the long term strength of ties between the two nations. For the people of China and the people of Israel, both of whom place heavy and significant emphasis on education and informed viewpoints, this situation should be promptly remedied.

Fortunately, conditions are now ripe to fill this vacuum. There is demand for knowledge, on both sides, a mutual appreciation by Jews and Chinese for each other’s past, current and potential contributions.

Even within China’s politburo circles, there is awareness that Israel Epstein, Sidney Rittenberg, and Sidney Shapiro— all Communist Party supporters in the early days of the PRC— were Jewish. There is a clear unmet need and a key opportunity to influence a future of positive interactions. A number of organizations are beginning to address this gap including Sino-Israel Global Network and Academic Leadership (SIGNAL).

SIGNAL is an independent non-profit organization created to enhance the strategic, diplomatic, cultural and economic relationship between China and Israel through academic cooperation. Through its strong emphasis on long term China-Israel academic programming, SIGNAL is establishing a foundation for enduring, multi-level partnership between China and Israel that will ensure long-term cooperation between the two nations. This should lead to a strong appreciation by the Chinese of the multifaceted nature of Israel and its people.

Based in Israel, SIGNAL operates its programming in both countries. In Israel, Chinese students are taken on day trips to get to know the land, the people, the customs and history as well and invited to attend semi-annual seminars at various Israeli universities. Such programming aims to provide background knowledge on the country where they are studying and offer an arena for students from China to share their experiences, gain new perspective and build a support system amongst themselves.

In China, SIGNAL coordinated the first contact between the municipality of Chongqing and Israel’s Embassy in Beijing. A few months after this initial introduction, Israel’s Ambassador, Amos Nadai, presided over Chongqing’s first-ever Israel Business Forum there and officiated over the start of SIGNAL’s Israel Studies Program at Sichuan International Studies University (SISU). The Ambassador called the program “a significant contribution to greater mutual understanding between our nations.”

SIGNAL’s main programming within China is its Israel Studies Programs for Chinese universities. Working in collaboration, SIGNAL and universities across China are developing the first comprehensive programs for undergraduate and graduate study in China on Israel as a modern nation-state. Just as Israeli universities have programs in China Studies, the SISU Israel Studies Program is to be the first of its kind in China, a parallel effort to teach Israel Studies in China. Thanks to the initiative of Dr. Fu Xiaowei and her Jewish Studies Center, the forward thinking administration of SISU and the good work of the new China-Israel academic organization, SIGNAL SISU is laying the groundwork to launch the country’s first Israel Studies Program. Embassies of both nations have expressed this as a historic milestone in the development of Sino-Israel academic relations.

Reaching beyond location-based programs, SIGNAL will soon launch its Virtual Resource Center, an academic website providing comprehensive information on Israel and its people in Chinese. The site will include articles on Israeli history, culture and society. It will provide answers posed by users about this unique nation. The Virtual Resource Center (VRC) will include information on Israel’s universities and how to apply to the vast range of degrees that are taught in English. In addition to essays, articles and other academic materials, the VRC will have a Video Channel providing Chinese language narrative to the many sites of great historical and cultural significance in Israel.
Israeli academia has been ahead of the curve in its commitment to Chinese studies. Hebrew University in Jerusalem opened its first Chinese class in 1958, more than three decades before official relations began between the two countries were established. Today, Israeli universities have waiting lists of Israeli students from around the country wishing to enroll in Chinese classes. There are workshops and seminars held on an almost weekly basis on issues related to China and Sino-Israel relations, topics ranging from trade policy to re-assessments of Confucian texts. In line with recent global trends, the Ministry of Education in Israel aims to incorporate China into its educational curriculum; it is considering the national incorporation of Chinese language instruction into primary and middle schools. Already a pilot program has a few hundred children in grammar school and junior high learning Chinese.

Sino-Israel relations are entering a new era of deeper ties and interconnectedness in the political and economic arenas. However, such formalized institutional structures can only succeed in the long-term if they are understood to support the interests of the greater public. This is an opportune moment to reach beyond superficial perceptions of one another’s political process and regional conflicts, and to gain truer understanding of each other’s existence by envisioning creative areas of cooperation between the two states through academic interchange.

The past five years have ushered in a strong wave of growing business relations between Israel and China. Now, as Israel turns 63, the coming five years have the potential to bring the dawn of strong intellectual, academic and scholarly relations. Strengthening ties between Israel and China will help not only scholars, business people, and government officials, but will extend to broader regional peace and stability.

This article was contributed by Carice Witte, the Founder/Executive Director of SIGNAL, along with Aurora Carlson, SIGNAL’s Head of Strategic Research.
SC Lowy Financial Services is a specialized investment bank focused on distressed and illiquid investments in Asia, Australia and Japan, headquartered in Hong Kong. SC Lowy is led by an experienced management team that pioneered distressed investment in Asia. They have been successfully together since 1998.

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Multicultural Mayhem:
Kosher Pigs, Jewish Lawyers and Chinese Gangsters

Film in Focus
by Jana Daniels

Television producer Moon Cho isn’t Chinese and she isn’t Jewish either, neither is co-writer and director Eric Patton but together they are the force behind Kosher Pig. (Is it even kosher put those two words together?)

For the producers, though, this inherent paradox in their sitcom’s title perfectly represents the complications involved in attempting to bring together two disparate cultures. And what if, like character Joy Cohen, these two seemingly disparate cultures were both critical parts of her own complex identity? Joy Cohen is in most ways like any other Jewish girl raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles and studying to be a lawyer, except, she happens to have a bit of an Asian look about her. Adopted at birth by her oh-so stereotypical Los Angeles Jewish parents (no offense to my in-laws), Chinese culture is entirely foreign to Joy. She makes gefilte fish, not shao mai (very definitely, very treife Chinese dumplings).

The sitcom follows Joy Cohen as she searches for her biological parents. Cohen dreams of bringing together these two families and making peace with her own multicultural identity.
To Cohen’s surprise however, her biological family is not living in a rural Chinese countryside, but rather also are in LA and are the owners of a Chinese Restaurant named “The Joy Luck Pig” (yes, this play on Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* is almost too silly to believe).

Ok, so where is this going? A kosher pig, The Joy Luck Pig Restaurant, a Jewish lawyer, even Chinese gangsters. First of all, the show is funny but jokes aside, there are themes and issues behind the laughs. As Patton explains, “We tried to focus primarily on the comedy, but that’s not to say we neglect the necessary pathos. Without an emotional connection you’ll never care for the characters, so we took those moments to build a connection to the audience.”

According to Cho, multiculturalism and blending cultures are very common themes in American sitcoms now. Patton furthers this idea by saying that multiculturalism is the ultimate American theme, as it is a country of immigrants and a veritable ‘melting pot’. As for the Chinese-Jewish connection, neither Cho nor Patton was aware of how hot a topic this combination is now, but they both found they were incredibly easy to blend. As Patton learned, “They may appear to be very disparate but they’re incredibly similar. They are both deeply rooted in tradition and have a resounding respect for older generations, incredibly tight families and strong family values. Not to mention that both cultures have an almost ritual relationship with their food.” Cho adds in that there’s a shared emphasis in the value of education and achieving success. (Also, quite simply, we Jews really do love Chinese food.)

In order to research the cultures, the multiculturalism in Los Angeles itself provided much of the context and readily available information as well as interactions with both cultures. The team also relied on the resources available at the Skirball Cultural Center but found their own cast itself was an invaluable resource drawing on information from actors Jim Lau, Elizabeth Sung, Tammy Kaitz and John Pleshette. Patton explains that through the cast, “the characters and their traditions really became more three-dimensional...The idea was to set those stereotypes up in a pilot episode so that as the series progresses we can deconstruct some of those stereotypes and the audience can learn the depth of the characters throughout an entire series.”

Again jokes aside, her nuclear family structure suddenly must also be altered in order to make room for her biological parents, creating a most unusual arrangement and an unconventional family. Ultimately, Cho suggests that if there is a message, the show is about self-acceptance. The character Joy Cohen’s struggles to reconcile the seemingly incongruent parts of her own identity are not dissimilar to those of others with multiple layers of ethnicity. The reality is, though, that Joy Cohen as an Asian-Jew must repeatedly be forced to defend her own ‘Judaism’, something Jews of European descent would never have to do. In kosher shops, when buying her matzah for Passover, she would be faced with a barrage of questions. She would constantly have to prove that she was Jewish just because of how she looks. The world would see her as Chinese and yet she would have no cultural context for her Chinese side. The irony is that, in some respects, life is simpler for her parents in that they fit well into Jewish stereotypes and her biological parents who fit so well into Chinese stereotypes. They don’t have to deal with the complexities of multicultural identity that she struggles with.

For a show that ‘focuses primarily on the comedy’ these are some weighty issues to tackle.
The Hong Kong Jewish Historical Society is planning a tour of Harbin, China. This tour will take place on September 8-11, 2011.

The trip will include an English speaking tour guide with a background in Jewish history.

Keynote lecture on Shabbat evening by Professor Dan Ben-Canaan, Chairperson of the Sino-Israeli Research and Study Center of Heilongjiang University.

Mark your diaries now and save the dates!

More details will be available shortly. If you are interested to join, please email the JHS at hshkg@yahoo.com
For many people, including most Jews, even lesser known than the Jewish refugee story in Shanghai during World War II, is the story of the Jews of Kaifeng, China. While both stories have been somewhat recently ‘rediscovered’, the Kaifeng story still carries a certain air of mystery to it. Today, there are not a lot of Western travelers in Kaifeng, as, by Chinese standards, it is a relatively “small” city of 800,000 people (with a metropolitan area of 4 million), but at one time, it was the largest city in the world. This height of Kaifeng’s glory was during the time of the Song Dynasty, which lasted from the late 10th Century to the late 13th Century.

For my family this was just one stop on a journey, during my sabbatical, that has taken us to Fiji, Australia, China, Dubai and then ultimately onto Israel for four months.

We enjoyed our time in Kaifeng even beyond the Jewish part of the tour, because it felt somehow more authentically “Chinese” to us after Shanghai, since the residents there have very little contact with Westerners. We were introduced to this community by Shi Lei, who is a descendant of these Jews and who spoke in Oakland, California just before we left for sabbatical. He also served as our tour guide in Kaifeng, and it was like drinking water directly from the spring instead of from bottles. (Of course, in China, as in many parts of the region, you can only drink water from bottles, but that’s another story entirely.)

The Kaifeng Jewish community is truly shrouded in mystery today, but most scholars believe that Jews first settled there during the Song dynasty from Persia. There they were welcomed by the Emperor and were called, literally, the “people who remove the sinew from the cow.” This appellation is based on the idea that those who keep Kosher do not eat any part of the animal that touches the sciatic nerve, derived from the scene in the Torah where Jacob wrestles with the angel.

The Jewish community remained intact for centuries, though they often intermarried with the local population so that they eventually became physically indistinguishable from other Chinese. For centuries, they maintained their traditions, more or less. We learned that in the end though they all almost completely assimilated. Then, of course, there was the Cultural Revolution of the fifties and sixties under Mao Tse-Tung. As a result, there are only about 50 members of the community that can even trace their roots back.

In Kaifeng there is now a three room exhibit in the very large Millenium City Park detailing the history of the community and telling their story through painting, writing, and photos. There is a wonderful model of the old synagogue and its courtyard, which looks just like any other Chinese holy place and courtyard rather than like a European synagogue.

Shi Lei also took us to his own family museum, which is also where the community gathers on some Shabbatot. There he has more photos as well
as ritual objects. Unfortunately, the roof recently caved in, so they are not meeting anywhere, and thus he was unable to gather them for me to meet with them or do any teaching. He also showed us the site of the former mikveh, which, believe it or not, now is the boiler room of a local hospital. It is locked, so we were unable to peek in. Shi Lei has seen it, and the people in town refer to it as the "old Jewish well." The hospital is also the site of the former synagogue, so just outside, we sang "Ma Tovu, how goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel," to remind us that we were standing on formerly sacred space.

He also took us to what they call "Teach Torah Lane," where the Jewish community used to live. It is now a rather poor part of town, where we saw two very sad sites: a cock trained for fighting was walking around and a pile of animal excrement. This lane has long been forgotten. How far it is from the Torah that used to be taught there.

We all connected with the story of these Jews. One really memorable part of the Kaifeng trip involved my son Jonah. On the Shanghai Jewish tour, the tour guide had him go to a little toy shop and told him he could pick out any toy in the store. He picked a basketball, and if you know Jonah, that is not a surprise. Because we don’t have the space to carry around a basketball for 5 months, he decided he wanted to give it to a boy in Kaifeng about his own age. He wanted to give it to someone in the Jewish community, but since we couldn’t meet any, he decided to give it to the first boy he saw at “Teach Torah Lane.” It was a very sweet moment.

It was an emotional parting from Shi Lei, who was such an amazing host. Before my trip I was contacted by an individual who had lived in Kaifeng for a year and taught Judaism to some of the members of the community. This person hopes to get rabbis interested in converting the community formally. Shi Lei’s take, along with other teachers, is that this sadly has divided the community rather than uniting it. It is hard to know who or what to believe. The situation is further complicated because there are definite cultural differences that are hard for us in the West to understand. Many of us would welcome the descendants of the Kaifeng Jewish community to the fold without hesitation, but they may not be willing to go there in the way that the rest of the Jewish world would require in order for them to gain acceptance. Regardless, controversy aside, it was a special moment and a meaningful journey that we will remember forever.


Previously, Rabbi Bloom served pulpits in Cranston, Rhode Island, South Salem, New York and Sydney, Australia. He was ordained at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1995 and received both Bachelors and Masters Degrees in Communication Studies from Northwestern University. He is the author of Out of the Mouths of Babes: What Children Can Teach Us About Spirituality, Jewish Issues and the Jewish People.
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