Never Forget, Never Forgive in Feudal Japan
Not a comic social commentary

Towards Jerusalem with an Easterly View
Taglit-Birthright’s shifting focus

Finding Kosher Kimchi in Korea
A Jewish US Army Chaplain’s report

Cover image: From the graphic novel Never Forget, Never Forgive by Rami Efal
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.

For more information, please email us at giving@asianjewishlife.org or donate online at http://www.razoo.com/story/Asian-Jewish-Life

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by Amelia Allsop

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by Yair Osherov

Book Reviews
by Susan Blumberg-Kason
Dear Editor:

I just finished reading the last edition of Asian Jewish Life and must send you a few words about the article on Israelis and drug abuse in India. Indeed many Israeli backpackers use drugs. I am not so sure about the statistics given in the article, but I find it strange and quite upsetting that it is pictured that it is only Israelis that are using drugs in India. One might wrongfully assume that all the other tens of thousands of young backpackers are not using any drugs and are instead just visiting museums.

This is a one sided story that fails to present reality. Adding to that, the Israeli military salary is hardly enough for a beer on a weekend and surely one can’t use it to pay for a trip.

I just wanted to let you know how I feel as an Israeli.

Regards,
Gil Azoulay

Dear Gil:

I am very sorry if the article offended you. That was clearly not the intention. You are absolutely correct. Backpackers of many nationalities use drugs but the article was specifically on one organization’s efforts to help Israelis. Asian Jewish Education Foundation International (AJEFI) is an organization with the central focus of Jewish education in India and providing support for Israelis in India. Their programs include developing Judaic studies, providing free accommodations to Jews and Israelis, offering drug rehabilitation for Israeli backpackers, and organizing community service projects that bridge sustainable relationships between Judaism and India.

This organization doesn't work to help backpackers as a whole nor do they aim to help Indians as a whole. They specifically aim to aid Jews and Israelis. I understand the potential sensitivity involved in seemingly singling out Israelis but the organization is an organization run by Jews to help Jews in a publication that reaches Jews.

In the same issue, we highlighted another organization, Lev Olam. Lev Olam also operates in India and recognizes the same potential temptations but have found a way to harnesses the Israeli backpackers’ energy and enthusiasm into a force for positive change. The article shows the best of Israeli travelers. Both organizations reach out to the same demographic but with different focuses, and with both doing important work.

If awareness of these types of resources and increased awareness about drug abuse helps even one single person, then we have done our job.

Erica Lyons
Dear Readers:

Happy Chinese New Year! I do love the opportunity to reflect on the occasion of the New Year and here in Hong Kong, as Jews, we have three. At Asian Jewish Life, we have much to celebrate this season as we publish our first anniversary issue. Asian Jewish Life has truly grown in the past year in terms of readership, scope, development and geographical reach; and will continue to grow in the Year of the Rabbit.

While I loved putting together the special India Issue, this issue finds Asian Jewish Life back looking across the broader region. Of course, India is not forgotten, with a beautifully, moving piece, How I Moved to India and Rediscovered my Judaism: A JDC Jewish Service Corps Volunteer reflects by Jeanine Buzali. Out of India we also have In an Ancient Land Revisited: Trade and Synagogues in South India by Dr. Shalva Weil.

For the first time, we have an article that depicts Jewish life in Korea. In Finding Kosher Kimchi in Korea: A Jewish US Army Chaplain’s report, Chaplain (CPT) Shlomo Shulman gives us a glimpse of not only what Jewish life is like in Korea but also a look at daily life on a United States military base.

Our cover story, Never Forget, Never Forgive in Feudal Japan: Not a comic social commentary is a look at Rami Efal’s graphic novel, Never Forget, Never Forgive (republished as The Lantern and the Wave). While admittedly, I am by no means an expert on this genre, Efal helps explain a bit about the graphic novel, and manga, as well as the power of images to stand for words. Using the story of Japanese samuri in a clan war, infused with his voice as the descendant of Holocaust survivors, Efal has given this craft a new edge.

Perhaps it is my imagination or my own now uniquely Eastern-skewed view of the Jewish world, but the topic of China and the Jews has seemed to permeate the Jewish press in recent months. While we have not put together an ever-so-popular Tiger vs. Jewish Mother piece, we have put together an exciting series of China-related articles of our own.

Taglit-Birthright explains why they are now looking east, including at China, in our Best of Asian Jewish Life piece, Towards Jerusalem with an Easterly View: Taglit-Birthright’s shifting focus by Gidi Mark.

Professor Lihong Song has also contributed an enlightening piece entitled, Mapping my Judaic Studies Career in China: An academic confession that explains how a Chinese academic chose to teach Judaic Studies and the personal connection he has forged with Jews and Judaism. Also from China, we have an Expat Diary piece, Letter from Modern Kaifeng, where Yair Osherov writes about his experience in Kaifeng and tackles some tough questions as he reaches out to the descendents of Chinese Jewry.

Long overdue, being Hong Kong based, is an AJL article actually from Hong Kong. Amelia Allsop, representing the Hong Kong Heritage Project, has written an article entitled The Lost Records Revealed: Hong Kong Heritage Project’s Jewish collection. The article takes us through their archives to get a glimpse at this rare and newly discovered collection.

Last but of course not least, Asian Jewish Life brings you the poetry of novelist Rachel DeWoskin and book reviews by our own books editor, Susan Bloomberg-Kason.

Again, please write in and tell us what you think and what stories you would like to see.

Thanks for reading!

Erica Lyons
Editor-in-Chief
The Lost Records Revealed
Hong Kong Heritage Project’s Jewish collection

The Kadoorie Family
The Kadoorie Family, Sephardi Jews, emigrated from Baghdad in 1880 to settle in the Far East. The family fortunes were founded by Sir Elly Kadoorie and Sir Ellis Kadoorie, who were pivotal players in the development of business giants such as the Hongkong & Shanghai Hotel Co. and China Light and Power. Elly’s sons, Lord Lawrence Kadoorie and Sir Horace Kadoorie continued the family businesses and philanthropic pursuits. The family is today headed by Lawrence’s son, Sir Michael Kadoorie.

The Hong Kong Heritage Project
In May 2007, Sir Michael founded the Hong Kong Heritage Project (HKHP). The HKHP is the first of its kind in Hong Kong; a project supported and driven by business with the purpose of preserving community history. The HKHP does this by promoting new avenues of research, enriching Hong Kong’s existing archival collection, encouraging young people to participate in the preservation of their community history and capturing unrepresented voices in Hong Kong’s historical narrative through the collection of oral history.

The HKHP is housed in an archive facility in Kowloon which holds 3,100 Kadoorie related records, as well as 550 filmed oral history interviews. The Archive was officially opened to the public in March 2009, and since then, has welcomed visitors from Shanghai, Israel, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and within Hong Kong’s academic community.

The Jewish Collection
Arguably the most precious and unique collection in the HKHP Archive are the records relating to the Jewish communities of Hong Kong and Shanghai, whose own records were mostly lost or destroyed during the Japanese Occupation in the Second World War.

The Kadoorie Family’s status and position within these two Jewish communities meant that high-level records were created and preserved by the Kadoorie brothers, Lawrence and Horace, in St. George’s Building, the Family’s Hong Kong office. Most records miraculously survived the Japanese Occupation in good condition (excluding the period 1942 – 1945). Recently rediscovered, this collection has been described by some within the Jewish Community today as “our lost records”. Indeed, using these records, it has been possible to trace a coherent historical thread from which we can expose the previously hidden dimensions of the Jewish community in the Far East during the inter-war years and beyond.

The Jewish Collection spans eighty years, from 1902 to 1982. The records are mainly in the form of correspondence, written between the Kadoorie brothers or with other leading members of the Jewish Community. Records also include Ohel Leah Synagogue membership lists and statement of accounts,
photos, pamphlets, and oral history interviews. Notably, the number of oral histories in the Jewish Collection reached over 100 in 2010, after the receipt of interviews undertaken by the Holocaust Center of Northern California in the 1980s – 1990s.

The Ohel Leah Synagogue Records 1902

The oldest surviving record in the Jewish Collection is a small booklet containing the 1902 Rules and Regulations of the Ohel Leah Synagogue. Generously donated by Sir Jacob Sassoon and named after his mother Leah, the Synagogue was built in 1902, on land given to the Jewish community by Sir Jacob and his brothers Edward and Meyer. Rule 3 of the 109 year old booklet displays its age: “Every subscriber shall pay a sum of not less than two dollars per month to be collected quarterly in advance.” The financial accounts of the Synagogue in the inter-war years (including 1941) have also been preserved. These are of particular interest in that they give the names, extent, and organizational structure of the members of the community during that era. Notable families during this time included the Gubbays, Abrahams, Raymonds and the Josephs. In 1936, there were only 38 individual subscribers to the Ohel Leah Synagogue, which comprised 25 families.

Outbreak of War and Hong Kong

The records also give clues as to the charitable work and impact of the Second World War on the established Jewish communities in Hong Kong and Shanghai, and the plight of the European Jewish refugees escaping Nazi tyranny to Shanghai in the late 1930s.

Lawrence Kadoorie’s 1939 speech at the Hong Kong Jewish Recreation Club (J.R.C), in his capacity as President of the Ohel Leah Synagogue, describes the desperate plight of Jewish communities abroad and the role played by the Hong Kong community in supporting the refugee Diaspora. The formation of the Jewish Refugee Society, the long-standing work undertaken by the Jewish Benevolent Society and the frequent visits to the Passport Office “on the subject of refugees who were in transit or have settled in the Colony” showed the Hong Kong community to be active, organized and aware. In his speech, Lawrence reiterated that each and every member had their own crucial role to play: “Today more than ever it is the duty of every Jew to realize his responsibilities.”

Another area in which the Hong Kong Jewish Community was
active was in the creation of an Entertainment Committee for the “soldiers of the Jewish persuasion” posted to Hong Kong during the Second World War. The Committee came about in July 1941, when Lawrence Kadoorie asked Mrs. Odell, an active member of the Jewish Community to help carry out a program for the entertainment of these men. The hope was to “make these men feel at home, more especially as most of them are away from England for the first time and are feeling the separation from their relatives and friends.” Events organized in 1941 included a dinner service on 1 October for Yom Kippur and an “At Home” held at the J.R.C. on 9 August.

Shanghai Refugees 1938 - 1945

Meanwhile, in the visa-free port of Shanghai, the numbers of European Jewish refugees arriving escalated to 15,000 in the 10 months from December 1938 through to September 1939. Various organizations were hastily established in Shanghai and elsewhere to support this burgeoning and penniless refugee population. The HKHP Archive holds pamphlets, letters and minute meetings of these organizations such as the Hilsfond Fuer Deutsche Juden, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JOINT or the JDC as they are better known today) and the Committee for the Assistance of European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, which issued passports, kept registries, provided assistance in finding jobs as well as financial aid and accommodation for the refugees.

S.J.Y.A: The Beginning

Horace Kadoorie established the Shanghai Jewish Youth Association (S.J.Y.A) in February 1937 - before many of the Jewish refugees had arrived - after a visit to the Shanghai Jewish School (S.J.S) in early January 1937. There, he found the children malnourished, plagued by tuberculosis and with little to no opportunities for employment. Soon after establishing the S.J.Y.A, an educational program was in full force, including business classes and an “Employment Bureau” at the Nieh Chih Kuei School, which was loaned to the Association by the Shanghai Municipal Council until 1941, when they were compelled to leave.

The S.J.Y.A also hosted summer camps with the tag-line: “The Jewish Children’s Fresh Air Camp”. Activities at the 1938 camp held on the grounds of the Shanghai University included a Fun Fair, evening film screenings, athletic events and amateur theater productions.

By February 1939, with the huge influx of refugees (arriving at this time at over 1000 per month) and the current S.J.S unable...
to cope with the increase in numbers, the S.J.Y.A expanded its activities from summer clubs and camps to regular education, and focused its attention on refugee children, after which the S.J.Y.A School, otherwise known as the Kadoorie School, became the largest Jewish School in Shanghai and an indispensable support network for refugee families.

Post-War Years

The records between the years 1942 – 1945 are lost to history as a consequence of the Japanese Occupation, but they pick up in earnest in 1945 to tell the story of the influx of refugees coming out of Shanghai and into Hong Kong, the end of the S.J.Y.A and the re-establishment of the Jewish Recreation Club in 1950.

Work with the JDC 1940s – 1950s

After the end of the War, hundreds of Jewish refugees passed through Hong Kong on their way out of China, prior to and after the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

Lawrence and Horace Kadoorie paid weekly visits to the Hong Kong Immigration Department in the 1940s and 1950s to ensure the refugees would have the necessary visas ready for resettlement to Israel and elsewhere. Preserved in the Archive are the thousands of letters written to governments, embassies, shipping lines and individuals to guarantee successful repatriation. Many were accommodated in The Peninsula Hotel, where Lawrence had been Chairman before the War, due to the acute accommodation crisis.

Also forming part of this JDC collection are letters forwarded by Horace, at that time the Hong Kong representative of the JDC, to and from refugees still residing in China. This free postal service, instituted at a time when formal postal channels were still closed, was a vital means of communication for the refugees who were finally able to make their first contact with friends and family abroad.

SJYA: The Final Days

In 1945, Horace was optimistic about the future of the S.J.Y.A School. He continued to be actively engaged in its affairs, and undertook fundraising just months after the end of the War. In November, he invited 22 leading members of the Ashkenazi Community for tea to Marble Hall (at that time the Kadoorie’s residence in Shanghai) in the hope of raising funds and support for the school.

A year later, the school was running smoothly. Horace’s letter to a friend in 1946 was reassuring: “I know that you will be glad to hear that S.J.Y.A affairs are progressing nicely. The JOINT are helping out and Mr. and Mrs. Grodsky take great interest in the centre. Mr. Toochinsky has been appointed Treasurer and is making a drive for funds amongst the Russian Community; Mr. Hamowy has promised to make a drive amongst the Syrian Community.”

In 1947, despite the school’s remarkable 99% pass rate in the Cambridge Senior Examination, the future looked bleak. Funds were drying up and the community’s numbers were rapidly dwindling as families continued to leave Shanghai. The school was dealt a further blow the following year when the much loved headmistress, Lucie Hartwich, immigrated to Australia due to “the difficult local situation”. By 1949, only 40 students were enrolled in classes. Although the “Kadoorie School” was kept open for as long as possible, in early 1949, as the Red Army approached Shanghai, the school was soon to come to an end.
Jewish Recreation Club 1950 - 1984

After his return to Hong Kong from Shanghai in 1949, Horace became the first President of the newly built Jewish Recreation Club (J.R.C). The J.R.C was established as an Association in 1905 and expanded by Elly Kadoorie in 1909. The beautiful J.R.C building survived the Japanese Occupation until two weeks prior to the termination of hostilities, when the Japanese forces pulled the Club down. The Club was rebuilt five years after the cessation of the War by the Hong Kong Jewish Community.

Records in the Jewish Collection chronicle the re-opening of the Club in 1950, and give an insight into the running of the Club, the nature of the Jewish Community in the immediate post-War years and the activities and organizational structure of that community.

Less successful, however, were the Flannel Dance and Film Show held in the same year. The Flannel Dance was “a pronounced flop due to the lack of the fairer sex” and despite the advantages of expert advice, the Film Show was a damp squib due to the worn out film soundtrack and acoustic difficulties. Other activities arranged by the J.R.C included Tombola Sessions, fund-raising drives for Israel, events hosted by the Jewish Women’s Association and a Hanukkah Ball. Most of the Club’s expenses in the opening year went towards the building and grounds, with purchases such as electric fans, a floor polisher and a hard tennis court.

At the end of the first year, Horace gave a positive appraisal of the J.R.C in his President’s speech: “I am glad to say that the Club has, and is, fulfilling its intended purpose, namely, to act as a meeting place for the Jewish Community… It provides cultural and social amenities for its members.”

Giving the lost records a new life

An exhibition showcasing selections from HKHP’s Jewish Collection was held in October 2010 at the Hong Kong Jewish Community Centre in conjunction with the Hong Kong Jewish Historical Society. Arrangements are underway to have the exhibition, entitled The Jews in Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Lost Records 1938-1950, displayed at universities and other institutions as well.

The HKHP will continue to preserve and share what is more than the story of the Kadoorie family and more than the story of the Jewish community but is rather a piece of the history of Hong Kong as a whole.

If you would like more information on HKHP’s Jewish or wider collection, or to visit the HKHP Archive, please contact us on: enquiry@hongkongheritage.org. More information on the Hong Kong Heritage Project can be found at: www.hongkongheritage.org.
Reuven Firestone was educated at Antioch College, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Hebrew Union College where he received his M.A. in Hebrew literature in 1980 and Rabbinic Ordination in 1982, and New York University where he received his Ph.D. in Arabic and Islamic studies in 1988. From 1987 to 1992, he taught at Boston University, and since 1993 he has served as associate and then full professor of Medieval Judaism and Islam at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. Professor Firestone is co-director of the Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement (CMJE), a joint program of Hebrew Union College, the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Foundation, and the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California.

Professor Firestone is the author of several books including An Introduction to Islam for Jews, Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam, and Who are the Real Chosen People: The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as over seventy articles on Judaism, Islam, and comparative studies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Professor Firestone regularly lectures at colleges and universities throughout the world including Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Oxford, Cambridge, Hebrew University, Tel-Aviv University, Ben-Gurion University, Ain Shams University in Cairo, Universität Potsdam, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, and Max-Planck-Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence. He has also lectured and led workshops in numerous synagogues, mosques, and churches throughout the US and abroad.

Friday, 4th March 2011, 8:00am – 10:00am
WHOSE JERUSALEM? THE HOLY CITY IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM
Starbucks Coffee
(Shop M2, Mezzanine Floor, Baskerville House, 13 Duddell Street)
Cost: HK$100 per person for Continental breakfast
RSVP Essential

Friday, 4th March 2011, 7:00pm
JEWS UNDER CHRISTIANITY, JEWS UNDER ISLAM
UJC Sanctuary
Professor Firestone will speak at Shabbat services

Saturday, 5th March 2011, 7:30pm
DIVINE AUTHORITY AND MASS VIOLENCE: HOLY WAR IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM
UJC Sanctuary
Havdalah, dessert, and discussion with Professor Firestone

Sunday, 6th March 2011, 10:00am
WHAT DOES ISLAM REALLY SAY ABOUT JEWS AND JUDAISM: A STUDY OF THE CLASSIC ISLAMIC TEXTS
A joint program of the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong and the Jewish Community Centre Events Committee
Garden Room, Jewish Community Centre
A light brunch will be provided

For all events, please RSVP to the UJC office by Thursday, 3rd March.
Tel: 2523-2985   Fax: 2523-3961   Email: ujc@ujc.org.hk   Web: www.ujc.org.hk
I'm a US Army chaplain serving in Seoul for the past year-and-a-half and I'm assigned to the military police – MPs – who handle law enforcement duties on all the US military bases in Korea. I also cover a few other units that don't have a chaplain assigned to them, or at least not anywhere nearby. In addition, as the only Jewish chaplain on the peninsula, I am kept busy.

South Korea has been in the news a lot lately. It's hard to believe this ultra-modern, peaceful country, with spotless sidewalks and almost no street crime, was once on the front lines of the last battle of the Cold War.

On Friday nights, I hold Shabbat services at the base chapel. Typically we get about 25 people depending on what's for dinner afterward. When my family is here with me, we savor my wife's Martha Stewart-modeled cuisine. Otherwise the typical fare is a bit more basic. My wife spoils us with all the staples, often from scratch: fresh challah, gefilte fish, matzah ball soup, potato kugel, chocolate brownies and other delectable desserts, all the things we crave from home. Nowadays, though, she and our children tend to spend a lot of time in Jerusalem leaving.
The crowd here includes soldiers with yeshiva backgrounds – men and women – soldiers just discovering their Judaism, English teachers, government employees and business executives, Israelis, and even a sizeable group of Korean civilians who’ve been attending Jewish services at the chapel for years.

Judaism is quite popular in Korea. About 30,000 Koreans visit Israel each year as tourists. In fact, Korean Airlines operates three direct flights to Tel Aviv each week, and they’re often full. There are even obscure titles like Talmud Stories for Children translated into Korean. I’ve seen Korean-Hebrew editions of the Passover Haggadah as well as the Purim Megilla.

Jewish life is full here. The base commissary stocks Empire frozen chicken and turkey, jars of gefilte fish, grape juice and wine, frozen bread rolls and almost any kind of kosher food you would find in a big city supermarket in the United States.

The Army operates a hilltop retreat center not far away, where we hold larger scale events, like Passover Seders and High Holiday services. There’s a large chapel, kitchen and dining hall there, and plenty of guest rooms for those spending the night.

I’ve had some terrific Chabad yeshiva guys fly over to lead services, blow the shofar and read from the Torah scroll. They also kosher the kitchen and supervise the food preparation, although the local Korean staff is now fairly familiar with the laws of kashrus, having worked there for years.

Holidays like Purim, Simchas Torah and Tisha B’Av are usually celebrated along with the local Chabad House located down the road from the base. But this year for the High Holidays, we also merged congregations, so the crowd swelled to nearly 100 people. It was about as diverse a gathering of Jews that ever existed; from the rabbi himself, to the Israeli ambassador, staff from the Israeli and US embassies, American civilians working in Korea, senior US Army officers and their families, and infantry soldiers stationed on the DMZ (the demilitarized zone at the border with North Korea, about 30 miles from Seoul).

While perhaps I’m not quite a wise rabbinic authority, for the Jews in the military in Korea, I’m all there is. I have managed to organize a bris, not an everyday occurrence on a US military base. I consulted with an Army pediatrician at the base hospital, who was Jewish and a regular at my Friday night chapel services. The father as it turned out is an Army doctor as well and performed the mitzvah himself, as intended but little practiced today.

Much of my military life and work takes place outside of the Jewish realm. My duties extend far beyond that. I spend most of my week working with my battalion helping soldiers with personal problems, from marital problems to issues with their commanders. Soldiers in my unit have asked me to “bless” their newborn babies and perform non-religious (non Jewish) weddings, among other things. Often I’m also
asked to deliver a “non-denominational” invocation prayer at change-of-command ceremonies and memorial observances, “spiritual fitness events” and other occasions.

Before the Army, I didn’t have much of a background in what they call the “ministry”: counseling or attending to the psychological crises of strangers. I’ve become more proficient in the past four years. Knocks on the door and phone calls in the middle of the night have become familiar to me. I am an objective third party in marital squabbles. I sit with soldiers, listening for hours as they confide in me. I work through their dilemmas and have become a keeper of secrets of some of the most personal of details. Very often, it’s simply a listening ear that lessens most of the anxiety and worry on the base.

Sometimes though, my real strength is put to the test not necessarily as a soldier but as a man. I’ll never forget the call I got from a base hospital chaplain one afternoon. I was told that a seven week old baby girl with irreversible brain damage was going to be taken off life support. While the Torah strictly forbids such things, there wasn’t anything I could do – I didn’t even know the parents’ names. The young mother and father were both MPs and wanted the chaplain there when they pulled the plug.

I shared a taxi from the base hospital with the head nurse and the case manager. We drove through rush-hour Seoul traffic late on Friday afternoon to Samsung Hospital, a massive, state-of-the art structure with futuristic giant-screen TV monitors in the lobby, hundreds of patients and visitors flowing down every corridor and stairway.

The case manager had been there before. She led us up to the newborn intensive care ward. We washed our hands with special soap and donned disposable plastic aprons, then walked in.

There were incubators everywhere, rows of them, some pushed up against the walls and hallways; many had premature babies in them. I wondered how they were able to live being so small.

I watched as these tiny babies squirmed around in their basinetts, hooked up to various tubes from all directions.

We found the couple, both 20-year-old soldiers. The mother had a large tattoo on her calf, a depiction of stuffed animals and the words “Good Night, Sweet Princesses – May 26, 2008” – a reference, I learned, to the twin girls she’d carried to term, both stillborn, barely more than a year ago.

She had ruptured her uterus during her previous pregnancy and didn’t realize it needed to heal completely before she attempted another pregnancy. She was pregnant just weeks after losing the twins. She went into labor still not understanding the high risk she faced. While the hospital on our base is modern, it is not equipped for that kind of delivery. By the time she was transferred to Samsung, the baby had suffered irreversible brain damage.

The hospital ethics committee had met several times already and determined the baby met all the criteria to be declared clinically brain-dead. Still, an EKG test picked up a weak flutter of brain stem activity, which left the infant “legally” very much alive. With no chance of the baby ever leaving the intensive care ward, the nurse described her to me as a “flower just getting watered each day.” The couple had already made their decision, one of the hardest they would ever face.

The traffic was brutal and we didn’t arrive until 4:00 p.m. Still unsure what lay ahead and trying to distract myself, I preoccupied myself worrying that we wouldn’t make it back to the base in time for Shabbat.

A dozen Korean nurses and doctors in
scrubs and white coats stood around a bassinet. The baby seemingly slept so peacefully. Her little fingers stuck out of the sleeves of the pink jumper her mother had dressed her in. She wanted a last photograph holding her baby girl. Her mother picked up her baby up and the father leaned in close; a macabre family portrait. Then she was laid back in the bassinet.

I knew I should say something to them, but I had no idea what. I stepped forward and put a hand on the father’s shoulder and said, “I’m right here if you need me.”

The nurse looked at her mother and her mother nodded. The nurse pushed a button on the machine. All the lights went off on the machine. The young father – who seemed barely out of high school – stroked his wife’s back tenderly. She held onto the infant’s foot, he held onto her tiny hand. Some of the nurses cried as the mother sobbed.

A few minutes later, one of the doctors checked a monitor, said something in Korean. The respirator tube was removed from her tiny mouth. One of the nurses handed the mother a pink blanket, which she used to wrap around the baby. She cradled the bundle in her arms. We all trailed along in silence, a ghoulish parade following a young couple holding a blanket with a dead baby inside. “They’d like you to say a prayer for their baby before the mortuary team arrives,” a nurse explained.

Despite the obvious theological differences I had with the decision that had been made, I’d managed to scratch down a few thoughts on an index card. I took a deep breath and stepped inside the room. After some awkward condolences and apologies, I stood in front of the couple and read:

Almighty God, this precious baby graced this world for just a few short weeks.

Master of the Universe, in Your infinite wisdom, You gave her to her mother and father with a tender little body that was broken inside. For this reason only, they return her holy soul to You today, as innocent and pure as it was when she entered the world. One day we will all meet again in the Garden of Heaven, where we will bask in the light of clarity and understanding and forget all the sadness we feel at this moment.

It is with heavy hearts that we act today. God Almighty, we beg You to forgive us for our arrogance, and look upon us with mercy. Amen.

I sat in silence in the taxi on the ride back to the base. What is there to say after you’ve just witnessed the Angel of Death pass through the room? I am a soldier, though I am a Jew and can’t pretend to not be deeply touched by this experience. I am a father.

I tried to let my mind shift back to Shabbat, which was rapidly approaching. What’s the theme of this week’s Torah reading? Will there be enough challah for everyone if we get a big crowd tonight?

Something weighed heavily on me. What lesson did the Almighty want us to learn from what just happened? That life is fragile? That things don’t always work out the way you plan? It seemed a harsh way to teach the point.

I step inside the room to make the Kiddush for Shabbat for a room filled with soldiers, travelers, backpackers and locals. I go to sleep that evening thankful for what I have and blessed to be able to hug my children. ☀️

Shlomo Shulman grew up in Los Angeles. He and his family have been stationed in Korea since June 2009. Prior to his present assignment, he served in Iraq for 15 months, followed by almost a year in Savannah, Georgia. He can be reached at a.shulman@us.army.mil
We were small talk and falafel
when from the kitchen, out she shimmered gold all
over, between tables that were suddenly full
of hungry people. She was a lull

in conversation - pushed her right
hip through the air so thick the room bulged tight.
A man in yellow blew fruit hooka smoke
clouds, bellowed, singing, took a toke

and cheered. Her arms wound flails
underneath the bands and metal scales
of a sequined top. She was all skin, her skirt so low
along her stomach that a hollow

scar line smiled out, cesarian, maybe a sneer
beneath hot glittered scraps that made the light appear
and disappear – thrown off too fast to catch. Her
hips spun the public circle, were

the joy of every table. She flared smiles, brushed
up purple chairs, arrived at our feast last, a little rushed
before the music stopped. She faltered, looked outside
the window. Zero: instant winter. I looked too, tried
to see what it was she saw. Cold air
seared the glass right where
our four eyes - hers and mine – reflected
out and in some kind of blinking recognition, met.


Chinese Highway

You wanted to take an overnight train from Xi’an, but I hired the driver named Yang, who danced as he drove. “Yan’an peasant song!” he said, gesturing prettily with his right hand. You rolled your eyes and started up again -

we should’ve taken – but stopped talking just as he stopped singing at the accident. Three peasant trucks had collided and were nothing now but burning metal, ruined in the road. We gaped, maybe relieved to find machines we make are not any stronger than we are. They gushed out radiator water. Sunlit oil made the drivers’ graveyard holographic. Their bodies were the smallest obstacle to traffic.

A farmer coming to sell soda led his donkey and rickshaw over them.

Two tow trucks and an ambulance arrived. To claim remains, clear passages for cars. We moved through but sat still, our fear made quiet. Driver Yang looked at us in the rearview mirror. One of those trucks was carrying bees, he said, and drove into a sheer curtain of them, stingers buzzing, thick smoke rising up from honey-truck eleven. The road stayed steeped in sugar glass and we recoiled, covering our faces even as Yang went back to the local song about love: If I don’t see your face for three days, sweetheart, I can not swallow one strand of noodle.

Seafood

In the neon Rainbow Seafood Club, we remember the future before us: visible, audible, edible. Now past is long out of our range. Dark, estranged, we watch cloudy cases lobsters peer back from eye-stalks, walk glass to glass wall, sideways, twisting through crowded water with one tense and motion, present.

In our poetry section we look at the work of poets with both Asian and Jewish connections. While some of the poems we include will tie together both Asian and Jewish themes, or will be inspired by only one of these themes, we want our poetry section to be broader than that. As our poets show, Jewish writing does not only focus on Jewish topics but is often subtly colored by the warmth and humanism that imbues Judaism as a whole. This will be a regular section in the magazine and we are looking to expand our pool of poets. Please send your poetry in for consideration to submissions@asianjewishlife.org.

Rachel DeWoskin spent her twenties in China as a consultant, writer, and the unlikely star of a nighttime soap opera called “Foreign Babes in Beijing.” Her memoir of those years, Foreign Babes in Beijing, has been published in six countries and is being developed as a television series by HBO. Her novel Repeat After Me, about a young American ESL teacher, a troubled Chinese radical, and their unexpected New York romance, won a Foreward Magazine Book of the Year award. Her most recent book, the novel Big Girl Small, is forthcoming from FSG in 2011. Rachel divides her time between NYC, Chicago, and Beijing with her husband, playwright Zayd Dohrn, and their two little girls.
The Capital Jewish Forum aims to promote discussion and engagement with intellectuals, dignitaries and leaders on topics which are relevant to Jewish academic, policy, business and other professionals in Australia. The Capital Jewish Forum has no ideological or political affiliation.

The goals of the Capital Jewish Forum include to:

1. Focus attention of leaders and key decision makers on issues pertinent to the Jewish community and allow CJF members to meet and interact with these leaders and decision makers.
2. Provide a unique and contemporary framework open to Jewish professionals with diverse political and ideological views.
3. Offer stimulating opportunities for Jewish professionals to enhance their Jewish identity through meaningful engagement and networking with their Jewish contemporaries.

For more information, please visit: www.capitaljewishforum.org
When I sat down to try to write a short reflection piece about my year in Mumbai as a JDC Jewish Service Corps (JSC) volunteer, I shuddered slightly. The thought of condensing everything I learned there, along with the deep personal connection I developed with members of the Indian-Jewish community, seemed impossible.

Being in this line of work, I often found myself explaining what it’s like to be a foreign volunteer entering a community in a country you barely know and getting a ‘job done’ in a cultural setting that is so very different from yours. It requires an acute sense of adventure, fearlessness in the face of the unknown, adaptation, and the willingness to accept that the truths you grew up with turn out to be completely wrong. You also need the ability to laugh at yourself and discover that sometimes there is a clear right and wrong which transcends cultural and moral ambiguities. Most important, you need to be able to listen closely, relate to and genuinely empathize with different kinds of people, each one with an entirely different set of experiences.

Once I really sat down to write this piece, though, one thought kept recurring, and it wasn’t how adventurous India had made me. It was how after twelve months in Mumbai, I felt like I moved to India to become more Jewish.

The JSC volunteers’ job in the community is not quite 24/7, but it is pretty close. We work full time and go to all the evening and weekend community events: weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, Brits, funerals, and the unique Indian-Jewish custom of Malida, which happens, to quote an Indian Jew, “whenever something is fulfilled”, such as (happy) life cycle events, a synagogue anniversary, buying a new house, healing after a prolonged illness, etc.

Most of our office time is spent planning informal Jewish education sessions for a wide variety of ages, or organizing major and minor events of the Jewish calendar. On Sundays, when members of the community come to the JCC we teach the kids and the teenagers in the morning, while the afternoon is dedicated to spending time with the youth either in a formal session or just hanging out. We also teach adult
Jewish education classes on weekday evenings, plan camps and, somehow, manage to have friends.

And that community — with a completely different history, which belongs to a country with a decidedly non-Western culture — obviously has traditions, customs and spiritual approaches that are a product of its own experience and evolution. Working in India, a country where religious identity is deeply tied into all the other aspects of identity, one of the oldest “native” Jewish Diaspora communities, has taught me that being Jewish goes beyond saying the same prayers and following the same holidays. It’s about living a life that places importance on certain ideals, like community (especially when the community is small), and celebrations centered and transcending a moment in an individuals’ life. It’s about transmitting specific values, from parent to child, and incorporating those values and ideas into one’s daily life.

This experience was so intense because I was living and breathing Judaism like never before. I faced the dawning realization that my ideas and notions about Judaism, which I thought were pretty broad to begin with, fit into a small box that had little-to no room for anything different. So I began reassessing what it means to be Jewish. I thought about it through India’s warm “winter” months, while attending Sunday weddings and planning Hanukah events. I thought about it as it began to get hotter and more humid, and as the community (and Mumbai) already felt like home.

Indian Jews are barely distinguishable from non-Jews in their country of residence. The only real, substantial difference is their deeply Jewish approach to life, and a genuine and profound connection to Israel, which is, of course, what they share with many other Jews around the world. So many things I thought were common to all (Western, I now add) Jews ended up being the influence of other Western religions and Western thought in general.

It turns out that we’re often wrong about the things we place importance on. The specific kinds of dishes for Shabbat dinner matter less than whether or not it was cooked with love and the intention of sharing it with one’s family. Passover rituals vary from tradition to tradition, and are certainly different in India, but what is universal is the spirit of passing on a beautiful message of freedom. Prayers in the synagogue are always dense and usually hard to follow (in Mumbai it was even harder...
since most of the siddurim are in Marathi – the local language – transliterated from Hebrew), but the fervor and strength of the prayers are always present.

Every Indian-Jewish experience I had was genuine in its intention. Joy and faith were palpable on festivals, as was the thrill of a community reunion. I think of High Holidays spent in prayer with the community, Simchat Torah dancing, weddings, Mendhis (ceremony where henna is applied), and Malidas in the synagogue courtyard, lights hanging across the night sky, the stage brightly decorated, people dressed up, celebrating together, eating, talking, being with each other after a long time apart.

And while it is practically identical to what I’ve seen and experienced with other Jewish communities in the U.S., France, Spain, Mexico, and Canada, at the same time it is different, entirely its own way of being, simultaneously so Indian and so Jewish. The uniqueness may lie in the community’s alternative history; it may be the result of the mixture of Indian culture and religions and Judaism; or it might be the distinctive spirit of this community, so small and apparently isolated, united like a large family, with its feuds and arguments and deep, underlying love, strong and persistent throughout the centuries.

Being a volunteer in India has been a long, continuous lesson on how to make a box expand and grow and take on a new form. I understand my tradition and faith better now, and I can clearly identify, in all its complexity, the intricate relationship between spirituality and community. The Indian-Jewish community has taught me that. It was truly a wonderful community to be welcomed into.

When I think of the meaning of community, I think of the way Indian Jews celebrate: all ages together, kids running around, lots of delicious food following a ceremony, sitting outside, talking, having a good time.

Jeanine Buzali grew up in Mexico and Israel, and went to college in the United States. She served as the JDC Jewish Service Corps Volunteer in Mumbai, India in 2009-2010.

About the JDC
The Jewish Service Corps (JSC) is a project of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Through the JSC, JDC offers young Jews the opportunity to directly engage with JDC’s global mission and actively fulfill the value of Jewish responsibility through a meaningful service opportunity abroad. For additional information, please contact the JDC at globalservice@jdc.org or visit www.jdc.org/jsc
AJL is looking for potential editorial contributions with Jewish content and Asian flavor that focuses on art, cultural events, non-fiction, history, diversity, education, spirituality, politics, Israel and literature. Original poetry, photography, book reviews and fiction are also welcome. Everyone has a story to tell.

Even if you are not a writer, but would like your voice heard, please email us your questions, suggestions and ideas at info@asianjewishlife.org.

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Never Forget, Never Forgive in Feudal Japan
Not a comic social commentary
An image often has the power to transcend words. With beautiful, bold, black brush stroke sketches, graphic novelist Rami Efal screams out universal truths in his work *Never Forgive, Never Forget*, a recent nominee for the Ignatz Award, a comic book industry standard. Set in feudal Japan, the book is the story of a bitter homecoming in the midst of a long and bloody clan war.

The descendant of Holocaust survivors, Efal heard the words that later formed the title of his book, uttered over and over again while growing up in Israel. “Never forgive, never forget” he explains was a common mantra of the time among survivors and family. Efal firmly states however that this type of thinking “clouds our judgement”. He explains that unfortunately the title led to a misreading of the book as *Never Forget, Never Forgive* was not meant as the conclusion, but was rather meant to lead the reader to ask, “how do we go beyond it?”

The newly expanded and revised edition was actually renamed *The Lantern and the Wave*. Efal explains that the second edition accounts for growth and a bit of extra dimensionality to the characters so that they are able to move beyond the original motif of the refusal to forgive. According to Efal, “the new title of *The Lantern and the Wave* felt vaster, all-inclusive and mythical, and hits the right chord.”

How is it that Efal, the descendant of Holocaust survivors, is able to move past the concept this title represents while
others cling to it? Efal explains, “Not forgiving means giving up on asking ‘how did this happen?’ The Jewish people have a deep and intimate tie with the Germans, as we do with the Palestinians. We are bound by our shared histories.” He points to sincere efforts on the part of the Germans to face their past and is clear that it is his duty to acknowledge that effort. He resents any discourse of limitations on the so-called “right to forgive” as he sees forgiveness as a collective duty that we all have to do in order to effect real change. He emphasizes, though, that forgiveness does not mean forgetting.

Where does post-Holocaust-type discourse find its way into a book that is set in feudal Japan one might question? Again, Efal would argue that this is a human story, not one confined to any one group or time. He refers to feudal Japan as his fantasy never-never land but says he also considered placing the story in present-day Israel. But for Efal, the remote and foreign historical setting actually, “allows a safe distance to work with the personal experiences of growing up in war, with grief and with loneliness.”

Even with that safe distance, pieces of Efal and people close to him live within the characters. Initially, for example, he explains that his character Oda seemed to grow out of his father’s essential nature. He describes Oda as, “the embodiment of repression, of contained anger, a time bomb about to go off. He has a loving heart layered with frustration...” He later admits that as the character evolved, through the creative
process, he began to see what he explains as aspects of his own psychology. In fact Efal found that there were several “disowned aspects of me that I ignored or suppressed. I externalized the voices and let them acknowledge and just be in the presence of each other, all the while I watch, learn and feel. It was extremely transformative.”

As to why Efal felt his story was home in feudal Japan, quite frankly it seems as though Efal is a bit of a self-defined Japanophile, “I loved Japanese animation as a child; I practiced Karate, like most of my friends. For Purim I’d dress up as a ninja. Later, I was struck by the Japanese expressive, spontaneous ink paintings and calligraphy which was something fresh and unhindered and so different from the Western art I was exposed to. I traveled in Japan for seven weeks while researching the book to take the spirit in.” The research for the book, as well as a personal quest to work through a number of existential questions, further led him on a journey to explore Zen Buddhism. He lived in the Fire Lotus Temple at NYC’s Zen Center and took part in a two year comprehensive residential program that included meditation as well as communal living and study.

Though the work is a blend of many styles, the genre of manga, which Efal relies on heavily, is likewise a Japanese craft. Manga, or Japanese for comics, is as Efal explains, “more visually driven than the American comics, and emphasizes moment-by-moment depiction of action and less usage of words or captions to describe it. It allows a lot of space in the mind as you read or watch it.” The technique focuses on small details and frozen single moments rather than American comics’ action-packed frames. It is almost devoid of words, relying instead on sketched emotion. The loud silence in Efal’s work appears in only shades of black and white with the exception of the blood red on the cover. The effect is haunting.

In very much his own style, Efal also incorporates quiet animal scenes throughout the narrative. The animals are boldly drawn and carry with them a sense of peacefulness and strength. They stand alone and quite separate from the human conflict in the novel and seem to break through the action and drama and disrupt the chaos. To Efal they serve almost in judgment. “Animals, trees and the land observe our odd and unnecessary tendency to create pain for ourselves and other humans, as well as the planet,” he suggests. The animals are detached from the central action and are able to give a silent social commentary in very much the same way that Efal, the artist, is able to do about clan wars in feudal Japan standing at a safe distance.

Efal’s commentary extends far beyond feudal Japan. The connection to the Holocaust is clear but Efal further suggests that this is a timeless commentary. Contemporary society is not immune. He references the formal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, economic wars, gender inequality and racism. “There is only one wound, we are all bleeding from it,” concludes Efal.

This is a powerful statement, effusing a unique worldview. This is no ordinary comic book.
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Towards Jerusalem with an Easterly View

Taglit-Birthright’s shifting focus
There is no doubt that some of the fastest growing Jewish communities around the world are those in East Asia. In the ten years since its inception, Taglit-Birthright Israel has started a revolution in the way young Jews connect to their Jewish identities, to Israel, and to the communities from which they come and it is now looking to develop connections with the Jewish communities of the Far East.

Jewish history in East Asia has followed a similar pattern to Jewish history elsewhere around the world: Jews arrived there in order to escape persecution or in order to develop business opportunities. There is evidence of a Jewish community in Kaifeng from as early as 1,000 years ago, perhaps started by Jewish merchants passing through during their travels. The Jewish community of Shanghai developed in the mid-19th century and grew to roughly 30,000 at its height. Perhaps most famously, Chinese diplomat Dr. Feng Shan Ho saved thousands of Jews during World War II by granting them visas that enabled their escape to China and out of the hands of the Nazi regime.

It is a mark of Western-oriented culture that China and its surrounding neighbors were long referred to as the ‘Far-East.’ Even today, with the increasingly unavoidable reality that the nations of the region have a major impact on global events, there is still a prevalent attitude towards East Asia that views it as a distant entity, both geographically and culturally. This is evident in the under-representation of the region in many elements of global politics as well as among international corporations and non-profits.

“There, is a sleeping giant. Let him sleep! If he awakes, he will shake the world.” – Napoleon Bonaparte

There has been much debate about what Napoleon meant when he uttered this phrase about the region of Greater China. He may as well have said it about many of the nations of the region. Yet he would likely have done better to engage the region rather than to ‘let it sleep.’ Ultimately, Napoleon met his demise after barely 15 years as a world leader, while East Asia is home to civilizations more than 4,000 years old that in many ways have only just begun to realize their potential.

Even more than Napoleon in the early 19th century, those who refrain from engaging East Asia in today’s 21st century society will find themselves increasingly sidelined. The region has become a major influence in all realms, from technology to finance and from literature to athletics – persistent Western attitudes notwithstanding. I was recently surprised myself, but also quite pleased, to learn that my own son was studying Mandarin. It is a language that, like engagement with the people of East Asia, was once considered exotic but is now essential for anyone operating on a global level.

Taglit-Birthright too has shifted focus to the East and is looking for regional partners to join this project. No global approach in planning 21st century policy can afford to overlook the emerging importance of East Asia. More than a quarter million young Jews representing over 54 countries around the world can count themselves as Taglit-Birthright Israel alumni. With this remarkable growth, the time is overdue to welcome the Jewish communities of Asia into what has become the most important educational project and the most rapidly growing project in modern Jewish history.

Taglit-Birthright Israel was founded a little over a decade ago. Our goal was to strengthen Jewish identity, the connection
to Israel, and of equal importance, local Jewish communities. In so doing we sought to enrich societies around the world with Jewish communities. Brandeis University research shows that the educational impact of the trips has surpassed our wildest expectations. While past research had shown young Jews distancing themselves from their local Jewish communities, we are now seeing for the first time thousands upon thousands of young Jews looking to take responsibility for the future of their community and of their people. Mutual responsibility among young Jews has become popular – something that is particularly evident among young American Jews.

The groundbreaking concept that led to our tremendous success is the gift of a first-time trip to Israel. Any young person between the ages of 18-26 with at least one Jewish parent, who has never before been on an educational trip to Israel, is eligible for this no-strings-attached gift. Before Taglit-Birthright Israel was founded, only about 2,000 young Jews annually came to Israel for educational trips in this age bracket, but thanks to our trips that number has grown to 35,000.

The results, at the end of our first decade, have been staggering: a quarter of a million alumni, 54 countries, and soon, more than 50,000 every year – representing a majority of the Jewish populations in the Diaspora. The numbers are impressive – but they are less important than the qualitative impact we have had in communities around the world, from the smallest to the largest. There are entire cities where one cannot find eligible young Jews who have not participated in Taglit-Birthright Israel trips – and I would venture to say that those communities have been strengthened immeasurably by it. We have also reached out even to the smallest communities in the farthest
corners of the world – this past summer, for example, a group of 17 young adults from Suriname, an old South American Jewish community that has dwindled to 200 – traveled to Israel for the first time.

And yes, Taglit-Birthright Israel has yet to bring a group from China, Singapore, Japan, or any of their neighbors. Like the nations of East Asia, the Jews of the region have a unique perspective of the world, and I am confident that Taglit-Birthright Israel would offer them the opportunity to enrich their own communities and society as a result of the free trip. There can be only great benefit to both parties in the building of yet another bridge between East Asian and Jewish cultures – ancient societies that have become prominent players in the modern world. I look forward to the opportunity to expand our international project to this important part of the globe, and to strengthening the relationship between the Jewish people and our East Asian brothers and sisters.

Gidi Mark is the International CEO of Taglit-Birthright Israel. Before 2008 he served as the project’s International Director of Marketing and Community Relations. Mr. Mark joined the project at its inception after leaving Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he served as a diplomat in New York, Germany and Turkey.

If you are interested in additional information about the Taglit-Birthright program or are interested in becoming a partner of Taglit-Birthright Israel, please contact Yoni Heilman, Director of Worldwide Groups: yonih@taglitbri.com or +972-2-652-8222.
How did I start my interest in Jewish subjects and eventually become a Jewish studies scholar in China? As you can imagine, I have been asked this question countless times. It always evokes a sense of hesitation—even an anxiety—in me. Part of the reason is that I try to piece together many of my fragmented experiences into a meaningful whole. Which episode should I choose? Is this experience more meaningful or more fitting to recount in the current situation than that? To select this or that, that is the question. Ultimately, I have accumulated many different answers over the years. This assertion seems to put my intellectual integrity into question, but that is more an apparition than reality. Cecil Roth once explained that he became a historian “frankly for the pleasure of the thing.” Yet Lucy Dawidowicz was not convinced—for her, “no historian works only for the fun of it, no matter how much fun he gets out of it.” For me the search for relevance, rather than for an immutable and essential truth, is more instinctive.

I was trained as a historian. Historians instinctively contextualize, which makes me more hesitant. In this respect, I am aware that there is a profound chasm stretching between my Jewish inquirer and me. That is, Jews are invisible in China. Of course, there are descendents of the Kaifeng Jews, but they physically are indistinguishable from other Chinese
and are not halakhically sanctioned. True, there is organized Jewish life today in the big cities of Beijing and Shanghai, but it is accessible only to Jewish sojourners in China. For ordinary Chinese, the only way to learn about the Jewish people is by reading books.

Alas, there are numerous books on this topic. The shelves of Chinese bookstores have been lined with bestsellers on Jewish subjects, with such eye-catching titles as *Talmud: The Greatest Jewish Bible for Making Money, Unveiling the Secrets of Jewish Success in World Economy*...

In my opinion, this voyeuristic interest in the Jewish success reflects the fact that most Chinese are not so much interested in real Jews as the Jew as tropes. The most prevalent trope of this kind in China is that the Jew is anyone who is smart, wealthy and successful. As a matter of fact, some non-Jewish celebrities are widely regarded as Jewish in China, like Rockefeller, for example.

In retrospect, I myself was not impervious to this trope either. In my college years, I was a student in the department of history, majoring in the history of the West in general and the Roman Empire in particular. It’s natural for Chinese to be attracted to the Roman Empire. The parallels are self-evident: the geographical expansion, the relations between a central government and numerous local communities, the tensions between individual political freedom and the totalizing momentum of an empire, the multi-ethnic society and the consequent negotiation of cultural and religious identities. My concern with these issues brought my attention to the works of Fergus Millar, then the Camden Professor of Ancient History of Oxford University and a towering figure in today’s Roman studies. I took notice that his *The Emperor in the Roman World*, the work that had earned him international reputation, was inspired by his reading of Josephus. This was a new name for me. I had read Tacitus, Suetonius, Appian and some Livy. But who was Josephus? A Jewish renegade—this fact impressed me most, because it completely subverted another “fact” I gathered from the popular Chinese fantasies about the Jewish success. It goes like this: “Why have Jewish people survived so many persecutions while those persecutors themselves disappeared in historical dustbin? The secret lies in the fact that you cannot find a single Jewish traitor throughout the whole of Jewish history.” To Chinese sensibilities, the overtone of this assertion is “Why has Modern China declined? Because there were so many Chinese renegades who sold our national interests to Western and Japanese colonial powers.”

I was struck not by Josephus’ magnum opus on Jewish ancient history and Jewish War against the Romans, but by his slim books: firstly *Against Apion*, in which he refuted with eloquence and great skill various anti-Jewish slanders by pagan authors; and secondly his *Vita*, in which several creative tensions—between Eretz Israel and the Diaspora, between Talmud Torah and secular learning, between “tradition” and “modernity”—can be sensed. I think I was attracted by a fundamental tension in Josephus: he was a traitor, yet he had a burning feeling for the tradition inherent in him. Anyway, Josephus was the first Jewish traitor I discovered, hence the commencement of my credentials as a Jewish studies scholar.

After I got my PhD I went to Tel Aviv University to do post-doctoral research on the Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Empire. When I finished my stay in Israel, my friend Professor Samuel Heilman asked of me, “What’s your gain from your experience in Israel?” I understand he was trying to inquire whether there had been a sort of real change within me. I did not know the answer, but the question lingered on my mind. Two years ago, I returned to Jerusalem to improve my Hebrew. After spending three additional months in Israel, after visiting many people and places old and new, and after some unexpected experiences—for example, I returned from my first trip downtown for an errand, and all the buses were suspended by a gay parade. King David Street was full of sound and fury. The haredim, blocked the outside of the street, shouted in English “Gay Pigs, Get Aids”; while the people on the street responded with waving billboards in Hebrew “G-d Hates Hate”. On my last trip downtown on the eve of Yom Kippur, I walked into a market and witnessed kaparot. Having waved the live roosters around their heads and recited verses, they cut the roosters’ throats and inverted them into special containers that are smaller in bottom and larger on top so that the roosters, while
bleeding, cannot move but continue stretching their legs, as if dancing their last ballet. The protesting secular crowd screaming “Kaporot with Money not the Death of Chickens” was blocked outside this time—after all this, my answer to Sam’s question emerged clearer and clearer. I am more and more interested in living Judaism. Judaism is becoming more and more tangible and concrete, and I am increasingly curious, with my nose pressed to the glass looking in, at its colors, smells and breath.

In addition to the exposure of having lived the Jewish experience, this transformation is also materialized by my teaching experience. In China, I teach a course of Jewish civilization. Open to all university students, it usually attracts four hundred students each year. This course is challenging in at least two respects. Firstly, how to cram the long drama of the Jewish tradition from Abraham to Ben-Gurion into one semester? This is a universal challenge for anyone. Secondly, and uniquely, my students are neither Jewish—hence without any Jewish literacy—nor are they monotheistically minded—hence they seemed uninterested when I talk about the Bible’s different theological implications for Jews and Christians. They do however have an interest in getting to know why Jews were persecuted throughout history. This entails another basic question—how to impart the Jewish tradition in a meaningful way to a specific audience? I am progressively aware that there is a persistent tension looming behind these two questions, a tension, to put simply, between erudition and specialization, or as I would venture to suggest, between “Judaism as Culture” and “Judaism as Science.”

By “culture” and “science,” I am thinking of the Latin roots of the two words: *colere,* “to cultivate,” and *scire,* “to know.” To my superficial understanding, many Eastern historians’ ideal is to write an exhaustive and scientifically rigorous monograph that, to adapt the phrasing of Mark Twain, at least appears to know more and more about less and less, thereby increasing the amount of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. In contrast, the superlative model cherished by most Chinese historians is to write a general history whose ethos was set by Sima Qian about two thousand years ago, that is, “investigating the relations between the Heaven and human beings, perceiving the changes running through ancient to present, and forming one’s own insights.” Nourished by this tradition, and driven by my instinct to contextualize and to seek for relevance, I am inclined to objectively conceptualize Judaism more as culture. I am of the mindset that the knowledge of Judaism is important in cultivating a sophisticated perspective by seeking common ground while reserving differences between the two civilizations, Jewish and Chinese. In cultivating an open-minded approach to and respect for the dissimilarities between these, I can help my students fully understand themselves and their own position in the world.

My teaching experience has broadened my horizons and I have resolved to broaden further my specialized field. I am currently working on a monograph on Jewish identity in the Roman world, which tries to explore the self-perceptions of Josephus, Herod the Great, Bar-Kokhba, and the Jews as reflected in inscriptions and synagogue mosaics. After this project, I hope to write more on the Marranos. I also would like to further explore the exile of European Jewish intellectuals to the New World before the Second World War and how they rebuilt their lost world in a new land.

When in the United States, many Jewish friends ask my political views on Tibet. Our exchange of ideas usually makes me feel both frustrated and sympathetic. I am frustrated because it seems to me that under the spell of the beguiling smile of Dalai Lama they are not interested in Tibet in its historical existence but in Tibet as a trope: Tibet is the incarnation of those who are oppressed, persecuted, and marginalized. However, it is precisely the same trope that testifies to the bond of intellectual sympathy that I—a Chinese who translated Burkhardt’s *The Age of Constantine the Great,* in my eyes a nostalgic elegy to the lost world of the pagan individualism—may personally feel for Jews and Judaism. It is also in that same spirit that I am a professor of Humanities working in Jewish Studies in a Chinese university.

Finally, in antiquity, autobiographical works were entitled apologia or confessions, implying a sort of self-justification, self-documentation, or in the parlance of Ervin Goffman, self-presentation. According to Michael Stanislawski, the basic lesson he learnt from the study of Jewish autobiographies is, “If we were to sit down to tell the stories of our own lives, we would necessarily not tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but a highly selective account that historians of later generations would be well advised to treat skeptically.” Ironically, there is some truth in his assertion, but to which I would hasten to add that what I just presented is the most sincere and candid one I have ever made.

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The Calcutta-born novelist Amitav Ghosh tells the tale, in his novel *In an Ancient Land*, of a medieval traveler by the name of Abraham Ben Yiju who conducted an import-export business from Cairo through Aden to India. Ben Yiju was a member of the Synagogue of Ben Ezra, or the “Synagogue of the Palestinians”, as it used to be known while it was still standing, in Cairo, at the end of the nineteenth century. It was in that synagogue that congregation members used to accumulate and store their papers and manuscripts. The last document that is known to have been deposited in this Genizah was a get, a divorce settlement, authorized in Bombay (today Mumbai).

The amazing thing about Ghosh’s novel is that Abraham Ben Yiju was a real person. He was born in Tunisia, and had extensive commercial connections with Hindus, Muslims and Christians, as well as with other Jews. In a recent monumental volume entitled “India Traders of the Middle Ages: Documents from the Cairo Geniza”, which was edited by the illustrious Prof. S.D. Goitein, who devoted his life to the study of the Geniza manuscripts, and Prof. Mordechai Friedman, his long-time research assistant (who himself worked on the “India Book” since 1962), some 80 documents mentioning Ben Yiju and his family are mentioned. So for years, scholars have known about trade between the Middle East and India in pepper, cardamom, perfume, betel nut, gold and silver.

Linguistic evidence points to an even earlier commercial connection between Israel and India’s Malabar Coast. In the Book of Kings it is narrated that the ships of King Solomon (c. tenth century

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**In an Ancient Land Revisited**

**Trade and Synagogues in South India**
transported cargo such as kofim (apes), tukim (peacocks), and almag (sandalwood or valgum) to the Temple; these unique words in Hebrew are of South Indian origin.

Travelers’ tales in the Talmud mention trade with India (Hoddu) and include specific Indian commodities, such as Indian ginger and iron. In the Book of Esther, the kingdom of King Ahaseuerus stretched from Hoddu, generally accepted to be India, to Kush, generally accepted to be Nubia or Ethiopia.

From the ninth century CE Jewish merchants known as Radanites traded from the Middle East to South Asia and back. The documents discovered in the Cairo Genizah mentioned above describe the trade in spices, pharmaceuticals, textiles, metals, gold, silver, and silks from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries between Arabic-speaking Jews and Hindu partners.

Until recently, archaeological evidence has been scanty to “prove” early maritime trade with South India. Now, in one of the world’s most fascinating archaeological excavations, the legendary port of Muziris, mentioned by the Romans and in Tamil texts, has been discovered in Kerala in South India. In 2006, the Kerala government launched the Muziris Heritage Project to “scientifically retrieve and preserve the legacy of Muziris.” Muziris or Pattanam, near Cranganore, mentioned so often by the Cochin Jews of the Malabar Coast in their oral history and folksongs, is believed to be that legendary port. The archaeological excavations are being undertaken by the Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR) at Pattanam with the collaborative support of major research institutions inside and outside India. They are in consultation with researchers in history, archaeology, geology, paleo-botany, archaeozoology, physical anthropology, geophysics, chemistry, marine archaeology, chemical oceanography, metallurgy, epigraphy and conservation sciences.

When I asked Dr. PJ Cherian, Director of the Pattanam Archaeological Research since 2007, whether the excavations have revealed any link with Jewish settlement in South India, he replied: “Not yet but we are optimistic of finding some material evidence of their ancient Indian contacts - even I would say dating to the pre-Roman period. One of the interesting finds of the last season was the Turquoise Glazed Pottery (TGP) of west Asian origin in the pre-Roman layers. We are awaiting its analytical report and hope it will be of help in tracing the early Jewish links with the Malabar Coast.” To date, 650 sherds (also known as potsherds) of glazed table wares and 850 sherds of torpedo jars from Iraq and western Iran have been dug out of the Pattanam trenches along with Mediterranean pottery sherds. Dr. Cherian is hopeful that the excavations will reveal a direct Jewish connection.

The Department of Tourism, Department
of Culture and the Department of Archaeology of the Government of Kerala are not oblivious to the potential that may come from Jewish and Israeli tourists, and from the increasing globalized interest in minority groups.

The beautiful Paradesi synagogue in Jew Town, Cochin, constructed in 1568, has been a well-known tourist site for years now, ever since Indira Gandhi attended its quarter-centenary celebrations in 1968. The Indian government issued a special commemorative stamp on the occasion. Today, sadly, there are exactly ten Paradesi Cochin Jews left in Jew Town in Cochin. Malabar Cochin Jews also lived in other settlements on the Malabar Coast before the vast majority of the community made aliyah in 1954. They had seven synagogues in Mala, Parur, Chennamangalam, two in Ernakulam and two in Cochin on the same road as the more famous Paradesi synagogue.

In 2005, the Kerala government agreed to undertake the renovation of the abandoned Cochin Jewish synagogue belonging to the Malabar Jews in the verdant village of Chennamangalam, though the Chennamangalam Jews now live in Israel. In February 2006, the Chennamangalam synagogue was re-opened with an exhibition on the Cochin Jews and the synagogue has become a popular tourist destination. Galia Hacco, a Malabar Jewess who grew up in Chennamangalam said, “The Chennamangalam Synagogue Museum opening in 2006 gave me the courage, hope and joy that the restoration of other of Kerala’s synagogues may be possible during my lifetime and indeed, shaping the legacy of my community is my passion. Communicating this legacy in India to Indians is the purpose of this involvement.”

In April 2010, the state government decided to aid the Kerala government bodies and fund a new project to restore the next of Cochin Jews’ abandoned synagogue, the Parur synagogue. Marian Sfoer, project director of the Chennamangalam exhibition, says that the Parur synagogue reminds her of the Second Temple: “The Parur synagogue’s exquisite design, with its small-scale colonnaded walkways leading to the sanctuary, brings to mind some elements of the Second Temple depicted in the model at the Israel Museum. When did a Jewish community start to settle on the Malabar Coast, and was it early enough so that they had a collective memory of the Temple?” she muses.

Jay Waronker, an American architect who has specialized in Indian Jewish synagogue architecture, said, “The present synagogue was erected in the 17th century, but probably stands on an older structure dating to the 12th century.” He further explained, “As with other
Cochin synagogues, the synagogue is made up of not one building but a collection of parts forming a distinct compound. Parur is notable for having the greatest number of connected and consecutive pieces which have survived fully intact, albeit rotting and crumbling. Unique to this synagogue is the way its parts are formally arranged and linked in a highly axial and ceremonial fashion. This same organization is also seen in some Hindu temples of Kerala and at later churches in the region.”

Benny Kuriakose, the South Indian architect in charge of the reconstruction, has made every attempt to conserve the former structure and has gone to great pains to try and reconstruct features that were long ago gone. A case in point is the stairway that once was connected to the second entrance house of the synagogue, where the two square storerooms are located that are adjacent to the breezeway that led up to the women’s gallery, which disintegrated. He has turned to members of the community to help him to draw it as it once was in order to produce an authentic reconstruction. Another example is the entry door of the gatehouse, where the original ground floor had wooden slatted shutters on the outside windows, but today there are only broken rolling blinds covering the windows.

The reconstructed Heichal or Ark will once again be a work of art. The previous one was taken by the Israel Museum in a curious turn of events when it imported the Malabar Jewish Cochin Kadavambagum Synagogue in the 1990’s. It is on display in the newly-opened Israel Museum.

Back in South India, the newly reconstructed Parur synagogue is almost complete. Today, visitors to Kerala can visit the Paradesi synagogue in Cochin, as well as the Chennamangalam synagogue. Soon the Parur synagogue will be added to the list of sites the Jewish tourist must see. Memories of ancient trade with the Middle East will be revived. One can only speculate whether the Jewish trader Ben Yiju, who has gained immortality in Amitav Ghosh’s novel, reached Kerala and whether he prayed in one of the Cochin synagogues.👿

Dr. Shalva Weil, a Hebrew University researcher, is a specialist on Indian Jewry. She is founding Chairperson (with Maestro Zubin Mehta as President) of the Israel-India Cultural Association. She co-curated the exhibition on Cochin Jews in the synagogue of Chendamangalam.
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Letter from Modern Kaifeng

Dear Jonie:

I am amazed at all I have learned in China. In order to produce one pound of beef, the cattle must be fed with 45 pounds of grain. To produce one pound of pork, a pig needs only 17 pounds of grain. Though pork is the cheapest meat and almost every family in China includes pork at its table, I read about families that will never eat pork. These families live in Kaifeng.

In the travel guide I was carrying, it mentioned that once there were Jews living in Kaifeng and today the only remaining evidence of this people is a street called “Teaching the Torah Lane” and a forgotten hatch of a mikveh. I decided to see Kaifeng for myself. It is a small Jewish world, even in China. I start by contacting an Israeli that was living there and he recommended I come on a Friday. What was waiting for me was not just a place with Jewish memories but a place with a contemporary Jewish atmosphere.

Around the table there were nearly 30 people, most clearly dressed in their best. I was shocked when Yage Wang (or Yaakov as he is better known) began reading in Hebrew, the familiar sounds of the text of the Friday Kiddush filled the room. When everybody excused themselves to wash in the traditional Jewish manner, I remained stunned. Where was I? Home in Israel? When Heng Shi (Tzuri) recited the Hamotzi over the munto (a Chinese bun) I again returned to China.

Kaifeng was once the capital of China and a main station along the Silk Road. Around 1000 years ago a group of Jewish Persian merchants looking for a place to settle along the Silk Road were welcomed to Kaifeng. They established a sub-community and eventually completely assimilated. Up until a few years ago, nearly the only connection to those original merchants was the unique last names the Chinese Emperor had given all the Jews so long ago. Though they still didn't eat pork and were told of grandmothers lighting candles on Friday nights, there was no connection to the symbolism of these acts.

I am told that a few years ago a group of curious Americans had initially helped revive Jewish life there. The community I find is thirsting for Jewish knowledge and tradition. I settle in and soon find myself filling many different roles. I am a Hebrew teacher, rabbi and cantor. I affix Mezuzahs. I share recipes. I find my niche in every role left unattended.

Since they don’t really speak English, each class or message had to be translated by Gui-yan (Esther). This presented a difficulty but the desire to learn was strong.

I am bothered not by these technical difficulties but by much bigger issues. I am concerned that every message and lesson I pass on is biased by my own background. I am also still exploring my own Jewish identity so who am I to instruct theirs? I find I need to dig deep, and also rely on the knowledge of my relatives through quickly exchanged emails.

I question the essence of my purpose in volunteering. In the beginning it was merely because it felt like the right thing to do. I begin to have deeper questions. Is it necessary to complicate their lives in light of the fact that Judaism doesn’t recognize them as Jews? And is it even permissible in Judaism to help them keep mitzvahs? Other thoughts arose also. What was their motivation? Were they mainly interested in the money that they were now getting? Were they just hoping to get to Israel?

While I asked myself these questions and searched for proof, I already knew the answers. Like my intention to help for the right reasons, these Jewish descendents had pure intentions too. There were plenty of reinforcements for my belief: the seriousness of Tzuri when he made Kiddush, the holding to the Yom Kippur fast despite how very organized and serious the Chinese are about their timetable for meals, and the communal effort to build the sukkah. It was the first sukkah in the town in 100 years. I see proof in the money that these families spend on Friday night meals and the bustle and scents that Shabbat brings as if it was a neighborhood in Jerusalem. Most of all the determination stands out. I see them thrive for knowledge. They listen carefully and absorb all the Jewish knowledge they can.

This has all reinforced my motivation to return to Kaifeng to help out for a third time. It is hard to stay indifferent to the donations they have collected on their own for the rehabilitation of the Carmel Forest. It is hard to stay indifferent to the warmth they treat every Jew and it is hard to stay indifferent to the pride that belonging to the broader Jewish community gives to them.

Yair
In his groundbreaking China memoir, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (Harper Perennial, 2001), Peter Hessler describes how colleagues and students at a small college in Sichuan province assume he must be Jewish because he’s so intelligent. Hessler is not Jewish, though the association that he highlights makes an interesting discussion in itself.

But what if he had been Jewish? Would Hessler have experienced those stereotypes almost on a daily basis? These questions are central to Michael Levy’s upcoming memoir, *Kosher Chinese: Living, Teaching, and Eating with China’s Other Billion* (Henry Holt, 2011).

Like Hessler, Levy traveled to China as a United States Peace Corps volunteer. When Levy signed up for the Peace Corps, he joined with the hope of serving his country after the United States’ devastating terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. He had no particular preference as to where the Peace Corps sent him. So when he learned he was going to China, he started learning about the country that would soon become home. Levy’s tour of duty lasted from 2005 until 2007, a time when many of China’s coastal cities sky-rocketed into the 21st century, all while the inland provinces continued to lag far behind. Levy has termed the interior population “the other billion” (people who don’t appear in glossy magazines or vacation overseas several times a year).

With less access to international news and foreigners, the students and colleagues Levy met in Guiyang, where he taught at Guizhou University, had never met a Jew. Levy quickly learned that he was placed right up there with Einstein and Karl Marx. He tried to balance how to keep up with certain Jewish customs and while at the same time assimilating into Chinese society. At one point he wrote that he’d eaten more non-kosher food in China than all his Levy ancestors put together. And then there’s Christmas. Between trying to explain the difference between being American and celebrating Christmas and trying to get out of dressing up as Santa at the local Wal-Mart, Levy treaded new waters in his new home.

Levy also developed close friendships with his students, a group of Chinese minority peasants who lived in a nearby village, and his university basketball teammates (yes, he’s recruited for the varsity basketball team, even though he’s not a student; each university is allowed one foreign player).

He learned what it meant to be a minority in China, not just from his own experience, but from his new village friends, too.

At the end of his two years in the Peace Corps, Levy left China with a better understanding of the country, a near fluency in the language, and a special place in his heart for his new friends and home in Guiyang.

Like Levy, journalist Dana Sachs happened upon Asia by happenstance. In her mid-twenties, Sachs worked as a journalist in San Francisco and decided she needed a break. So she and a friend quit their jobs and backpacked through Asia in 1989. When Sachs and her friend landed in Thailand, they learned the travel restrictions to Vietnam had softened for the first time since the fall of Saigon. Americans were now allowed to obtain travel visas to go there. So the two women jumped on the opportunity and found themselves in beautiful Vietnam, unspoiled by tourism.

In fact, her month in Vietnam, when she traveled from Ho Chi Minh City to Hanoi, made such an impression that she moved back to Hanoi three years later at the ripe age—in Vietnamese standards—of twenty-nine.

*The House on Dream Street: Memoir of an American Woman in Vietnam* (Seal Press, 2003) chronicles Sachs’ assimilation into Vietnamese society in the early- to mid-90s. Although Sachs had dreamed of Vietnam ever since her month-long journey in 1989, the title of her memoir refers to the Honda Dream motorcycles which lined her street.

On Dream Street she learned about Vietnamese family life through her landlords’ intrusive bursts into her room. She also learned about intimate relationships in Vietnam when she dated a Vietnamese guy who repaired motorbikes down the street.

Sachs’ Judaism doesn’t occupy a forefront role in her memoir as it does in Levy’s. In fact, she rarely mentions religion until much later in the book when her new American boyfriend, Todd (whom she later marries), arrives in Vietnam to visit her. While Todd refuses to eat pork, Sachs—like Levy—develops a when-in-Rome outlook when it comes to eating in Asia.

Hardly ‘Ugly Americans’, both Levy and Sachs live by the Jewish concept of tikkun olam as they successfully learn to assimilate into their new environments. ♦
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