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The Theology of the Chinese Jews, 1000–1850

Jordan Paper

Postscript by Rabbi Anson Laytner

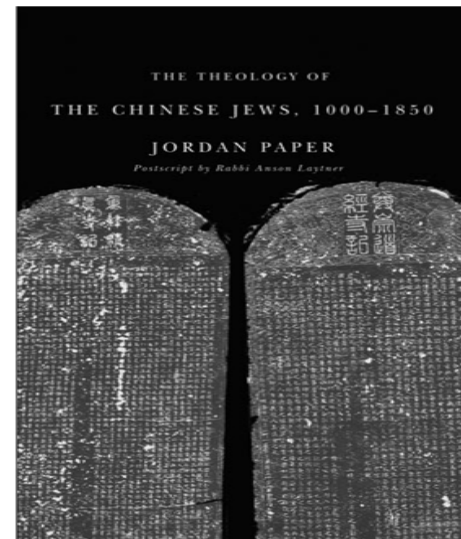
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A thousand years ago, the Chinese government invited merchants from one of the Chinese port synagogue communities to the capital, Kaifeng. The merchants settled there and the community prospered. Over centuries, with government support, the Kaifeng Jews built and rebuilt their synagogue, which became perhaps the world's largest. Some studied for the rabbinate; others prepared for civil service examinations, leading to a disproportionate number of Jewish government officials. While continuing orthodox Jewish practices they added rituals honouring their parents and the patriarchs, in keeping with Chinese custom. However, by the mid-eighteenth century—cut off from Judaism elsewhere for two centuries, their synagogue destroyed by a flood, their community impoverished and dispersed by a civil war that devastated Kaifeng—their Judaism became defunct.

The Theology of the Chinese Jews traces the history of Jews in China and explores how their theology's focus on love, rather than on the fear of a non-anthropomorphic God, may speak to contemporary liberal Jews. Equally relevant to contemporary Jews is that the Chinese Jews remained fully Jewish while harmonizing with the family-centred religion of China. In an illuminating postscript, Rabbi Anson Laytner underscores the point that Jewish culture can thrive in an open society, "without hostility, by absorbing the best of the dominant culture and making it one's own."

Jordan Paper is a professor emeritus at York University (East Asian and Religious Studies) and a fellow at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria. He studied Buddhist Chinese and received his doctorate in Chinese Language and Literature from the University of Wisconsin (Madison). His many books on religion and Chinese philosophy include *The Fu-Tzu: A Post-Han Confucian Text*, *The Spirits Are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion*, *The Chinese Way in Religion* (2nd edition), and *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Approach*.

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Points East

THE SINO-JUDAIC INSTITUTE 中國猶太研究院 מכון סיני יהודי

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March 2013

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MISSIONARIES THREATEN JEWISH SURVIVAL IN KAIFENG

by Rabbi Anson Laytner

A little less than a century ago, Bishop William Charles White, a Canadian Anglican missionary in China, convened a gathering of Kaifeng Jews in a bid to revive the failing community. It was a noble but ultimately duplicitous effort (at least for the Jews) because White's ultimate goal was the conversion of the Kaifeng Jews to Christianity. He thought that by helping them reconnect with their Jewish heritage, he would be better positioned to guide them to correct the errors of their beliefs and lead them to Christianity.¹

Fast forward to the 21st century. After a long hiatus, the Kaifeng Jews are again struggling to revive their community. Credit this to a moderately more open Chinese society, the wonders of the internet, and the intermittent presence of visiting, knowledgeable Western Jews. And, unfortunately, just like a century ago, Christian missionaries are also present, hoping to redirect the hearts and minds of Kaifeng Jews along Christian paths.

The evidence is fragmentary but, given the history of Christian missionary activity vis-à-vis the Jews and the Kaifeng Jews in particular, and the Chinese in general, it is highly probable that their intent is to convert and not simply to assist, just as was the case with Bishop White and other Protestant missionaries, like the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews, who visited Kaifeng from the mid-19th century on.

In 1995, an American Judeo-Christian² televangelist, Sid Roth, led an international troupe of dancers and singers to Kaifeng to participate in the Chrysanthemum Flower Festival, which occurred shortly after Sukkot. It was his second visit to Kaifeng and the culmination of his efforts to contact the Kaifeng Jews. Music, dance and witnessing/proselytizing took place at informal meetings with them. According to the Israeli sinologist and film-maker Noam Urbach, eyewitnesses told him that "rumors of their generosity toward Youtai (Jewish) descendants willing to convert caused many poor villagers from outside of Kaifeng to besiege their hotel, claiming to be Youtai descendants who wish to convert."³

While this outreach ended up a debacle, later efforts were more successful. The ironic part is that, even if conversion is their ultimate objective, along the way these Judeo-Christian missionaries can do a lot of good. For example, in 1999, capping several years' work, a Chinese Christian based in Beijing brought members of a Kaifeng Jewish family to Israel via Finland with

(continued on page 4)

ZERA YISRAEL AS THE NEW BASIS FOR CONVERSION

by Rabbi Chaim Amsellem

published on *Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals* and excerpted from: <http://www.jewishideas.org/articles/acceptance-commandments-conversion>

[Rabbi Chaim Amsellem is an Israeli politician and a former member of the Knesset. Following a rift between him and his former party, Shas, of which he was a founder, he established the Am Shalem party to run for the 2013 Knesset elections but failed to win any seats. His new political movement seeks to present an inclusive Judaism, much in the spirit of his own Moroccan Sephardic forebears. Rabbi Amsellem remains an important figure in the religious and political life of the State of Israel. Among his publications are two learned volumes on the topic of conversion to Judaism. This article appears in issue 14 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. We present his ideas here because of their implications for the Jews of Kaifeng and other "lost" Jewish groups.]

In the State of Israel, the topic of conversion frequently emerges at the top of the country's agenda. The successful immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union, who lived for decades behind the Iron Curtain, created a complicated halakhic situation regarding the identities of some of these immigrants. According to the plain halakha, more than 300,000 of these immigrants are categorized as non-Jews, despite the fact that they descend from Jews (Jewish father, grandfather, etc.) There is no doubt that, in order to solve this problem, there is a need to convert these immigrants in consonance with Jewish law.

The general population in Israel doesn't understand the halakhic perspective, which views the conversion process as a deep transformational process that takes place within the convert and demands a qualitative change in the individual's faith, behavior, and way of life. Many of those who attack the rabbinic and Torah institutions charge them with a lack of sensitivity and flexibility. They ask with bewilderment how it is possible that one would place barriers in the path of a person who is prepared to endanger and sacrifice his life for the security of the Jewish nation.

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TOTAL:	257

FROM THE EDITOR

Here's an item worth a story except that there was no one to write it: Hebrew Union College Klau Library has digitized its Kaifeng manuscript collection and shared it with scholars connected with the Sino-Judaic Institute, who in turn are planning on using the materials to help reconnect the Kaifeng Jews with their own authentic heritage. It's too long for a headline and too short for a story, but it is worth celebrating. HUC's collection contains 64 manuscripts from Kaifeng that includes prayers for Shabbat and holidays, and portions of the Torah. Now that they have been digitized, SJI scholars are using them to recreate a nusach Kaifeng, a way of prayer that was unique to Kaifeng. (It may not be too much different from that of Persia, but it will be authentically from Kaifeng.) We also intend to share the digital copies with the Kaifeng community so that items may be reproduced and featured in a private museum there and at the Bet HaTikvah school. The Kaifeng community has virtually nothing left of its patrimony. Its artifacts and manuscripts by and large were taken to the West and this project by HUC represents the first giving back, albeit digital, of materials to the community. Perhaps other institutions—the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, for example—will follow suit, digitize their collections and "return" their materials to Kaifeng.

Thank you Hebrew Union College, Klau Library and to its Administrative Librarian, Laurel S. Wolfson, for doing this mitzvah. And mazal tov to SJI President Rabbi Arnie Belzer for bringing years of intermittent correspondence to such a successful conclusion.

Anson Laytner

Correction: "My Two Diasporas" by So-Han Fan was originally an Asian Jewish Life article and was reprinted with permission in the Times of Israel, Bechol Lashon and eJewish Philanthropy. See the original at: http://asianjewishlife.org/pages/articles/AJL_Issue_10_Sept2012/AJL_WritersDesk_My2Diasporas.html

Points East

Anson Laytner, Publisher

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SJI members interested in receiving a copy of the annual financial report should send a self-addressed envelope to: Steve Hochstadt, Treasurer of the Sino-Judaic Institute, Illinois College, 1101 W College Ave., Jacksonville IL 62650.

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The way the book is written is both its strength and its weakness. On the one hand, we benefit from hearing multiple perspectives on common themes and there is even some dramatic tension as we follow 13 individual stories from episode to episode to their conclusion. On the other hand, some of these stories are so compelling that one sometimes wishes to read them in their entirety without the interruption of another person's story. "Wait your turn," I found myself thinking, "I want to find out what happened to so-and-so when she got to Shanghai." In the end, however, everyone has his or her turn and all the stories get told, so it all works out.

The book is graced by Hochstadt's scholarly, but not academic, introduction and conclusion which, when added to his prefaces to each chapter, offer a concise history of the Jewish refugee experience in Shanghai. All in all, this remarkable book offers a valuable contribution to the fields of Holocaust and Chinese history.

For an interview with Dr. Hochstadt and more on his book, please visit: <http://wsdata.com/redirect/2012-12-22/stevehochstadt.com> or stevehochstadt.com

Palgrave Macmillan is delighted to offer readers of *Points East* a **25% discount** on Steve Hochstadt's title *Exodus to Shanghai*:

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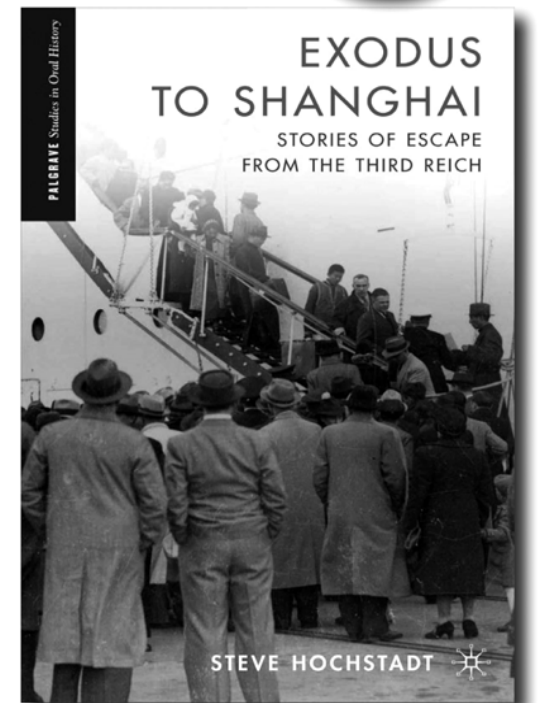
EXODUS TO SHANGHAI

STORIES OF ESCAPE FROM THE THIRD REICH

Steve Hochstadt

This moving oral history volume recounts the little known experiences of German-speaking Jews who ended up in Shanghai, China - the last option for those escaping Nazi persecution.

Of the 400,000 German-speaking Jews that escaped the Third Reich, about 16,000 ended up in Shanghai, China. This groundbreaking volume gathers 20 years of interviews with over 100 former Shanghai refugees. It offers a poignant collective portrait of courage, culture shock, persistence, and enduring hope in the face of unimaginable hardships.



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'Deftly weaving in the personal and political, Steve Hochstadt

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"I wanted a place where I'd have an opportunity to go to synagogue and celebrate Shabbat with other Jews, while I was studying," he says.

During his year in China, Barzilai became close with the community. When he subsequently came home to Israel, he wasn't ready to say goodbye. *Shavei Israel's* Rabbi Hanoch Avitzedek immediately recognized Barzilai's potential. At the request of *Shavei Israel* Chairman Michael Freund, who places great importance on assisting the Kaifeng Jews, the two began brainstorming on ways to enhance the community's connection to Judaism.

A key tool has been the newsletter, which comes out twice a month and has published nearly 40 issues so far. The newsletter, which includes articles on Jewish law, the *Parsha* (weekly Torah portion), and holidays (the next issue turns the spotlight on the upcoming holiday of Purim), is a collaborative effort, with some articles written by community members in Kaifeng and some by Barzilai here in Israel. "The idea is to be a connection, a bridge between the Jews in Kaifeng and those who are now living in Israel."

Barzilai is referring to the seven Kaifeng men who have been studying Judaism and Hebrew in Israel for the past two and a half years with *Shavei Israel's* help. Barzilai has been assisting *Shavei* here too. For example, he will be accompanying six of the seven when they immerse in the *mikveh* (ritual bath) later this week, the final step towards completing their formal return to Judaism and becoming officially recognized Israeli citizens. (The seventh, Hoshea Tony Liang, did so two weeks ago.)

Barzilai will then be the point person for navigating the Israeli government bureaucracy for the seven, setting them up with a long-term Hebrew *ulpan* (including housing) and helping them get settled as they begin their new lives in the Jewish state.

Shavei Israel's scholarship project for the Kaifeng community has been an equally important part of Barzilai's responsibilities and it has kept him quite busy looking for someone to fill the shoes of the first recipient, Shulamit Gershovich, who we've written about before. "It's not so

easy finding someone who either knows or is studying Chinese and who has the knowledge in Jewish subjects to teach the community," Barzilai explains.

Gershovich ended her term in Kaifeng last summer, so in the meantime, Barzilai returned to celebrate the High Holy Days last year with the community. He was delighted to be back, particularly for the holiday of Sukkot, which comes at an auspicious point of the year in China, Barzilai explains.

On the very same day of the lunar calendar (Sukkot always begins with the full moon) falls the Chinese "Mid-Autumn Festival," a national holiday when the many Chinese young people who travel to distant cities for work or school return home to be with their families. This makes it much easier for the Kaifeng Jews to come together without having to take an extra day off of work. About 60 Kaifeng Jews sat together under the *sukka* that Barzilai helped the community build (on the roof of one of the local Jewish schools).

Barzilai relates that he was able to bring the "4 Species" for Sukkot to Kaifeng for the holiday "And it's not so easy to get into China with a *lulav!*" he jokes, recalling certain suspicious customs officials. Other guests under the *sukka* included Shoshana Rebecca Li from Kaifeng who made *aliyah* from Kaifeng in 2006 and married Ami Emmanuel, also a new immigrant, albeit from the United States. The two were visiting Shoshana's family for the holidays, allowing the entire community to coo over their baby boy, named Tekoa.

The Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival is celebrated by eating round moon cakes, in honor of its full moon start. Jews traditionally eat round *challot* at this time of year – coincidental?

While Barzilai's work for *Shavei Israel* with the Kaifeng Jews is only part time, for him it's much more than an occupation. "I believe that G-d guides everything," he says. "I went to China and got to know this community and then I came back and got to know *Shavei*. I will keep on doing this no matter where I work in the future. This is a job for my soul."

BOOK NOOK

Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich,

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
272 pages. ISBN 978-1-137-00671-4.

by Steve Hochstadt

reviewed by Anson Laytner

Being a friend and colleague of Dr. Hochstadt, I probably should have recused myself as a reviewer of his book, but I took on the task and hoped that I would find the book favorable. Had I not, someone else would be writing this review rather than me.

I am happy to report that *Exodus to Shanghai* is a delight to read. Hochstadt has assembled a wonderful cast of former Shanghaians to tell their collective story of escape, survival and return, to which he has added his own lucid and insightful commentaries.

As Hochstadt notes in his introduction, recording oral histories and using them to write history has its own unique set of challenges. Can a person remember events accurately or is any memory, like the initial experience itself, necessarily subjective? But then too, all histories are subjective once one digs into causes and effects of the facts. Not even something as tangible as a universally accepted event is free from interpretation. Hochstadt ultimately decided that the oral histories of these former refugees were worth preserving and sharing and consequently our understanding of the Shanghai refugee experience is so much the richer for it.

Hochstadt has taken the unusual step of breaking apart the former refugees' stories so that they present a kaleidoscopic view of a number of shared experiences. The reader is thus able to view these experiences from up to 13 perspectives as his subjects reminisce about life in the Third Reich, leaving home, culture shock and community creation in Shanghai, living in the Designated Area, the end of the war, after the war, deciding where to leave after Shanghai, beginning another new life, and a summing up of their refugee experiences.

TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

The excerpt from Diane Tobin's "Are All Jews White? The Woody Allen Syndrome" (*Points East* 27/3:10) indirectly indicates that many contemporary North American Jews have very short cultural memories, as well as the refusal of many to accept the history and reality of the Chinese Jews and Chinese Judaism. In researching the latter topic, I repeatedly came across Jewish racial bigotry in the disinclination to accept the Chinese Jews, past as well as present, as Jews. Of course, this is not likely to be pertinent to readers of *Points East*.

I am in my mid-70s. When I grew up in Baltimore, Jews did not consider themselves to be "white." We lived semi-segregated lives; "semi" in the sense that it was not as bad as it was for African-Americans. We were restricted as to where we could live and where we could swim, etc. When I applied to universities, I discovered that almost all of those considered the best had small quotas for the acceptance of Jews. I matriculated at the University of Chicago, where the undergraduate body at that time was substantially Jewish, because it was the only university of its caliber that did not have a quota for Jews. When I sought summer work in Chicago, I was turned down by well over twenty firms because I was Jewish; I ended up with a job at a Jewish firm. I was turned down for tenure at my first faculty position at Indiana State University because, as my department chair stated, "We do not give tenure to your kind." I and the only other Jewish colleague were the only members of the department ever turned down for tenure who had doctorates and publications. It was in Indiana that I learned of the general American racial understanding that there were, in order of rank, "whites," Jews and "blacks;" Jews, as a racial category, were almost as much a target of the KKK as were blacks. I subsequently accepted a position at York University in Toronto. York had begun a few years earlier in the mid-1960s as a separate university from the University of Toronto, instead of a separate campus, at the instigation of the local Jewish community, because Jews, when accepted at Toronto, were made to feel unwelcome.

I never thought of myself as white, and

have always checked "other" when filling out forms. The Jews in Germany before the mid-1930s thought of themselves as "white" and look at what happened to them. Yet I have witnessed even in my own family an increasing adoption of a racial Jewish identification, with a concomitant prejudice against all those not considered "white," including Chinese. This began with the inception of Israel as a Jewish state; that is, since the secular Zionist replacement of Judaism as a religion with Judaism as a race came to the fore.

I point out my far from unique experiences to indicate first the dangers of complacency, of considering oneself white and fully accepted by the dominant culture. The climate of a half-century ago has never totally disappeared and could easily return, especially considering the rapid growth of fundamental Christianity in the U.S.

Secondly, the fallacy of Jews considering themselves "white" leads them to accept "white" racial prejudice and apply it to other than Ashkenazi Jews, especially Jews from Southeast Asia ("Near East"), India, Africa and China. If we can rid ourselves of the racial bigotry in which we as Jews identify ourselves by an assumed superior skin color (far from a few Ashkenazi are actually darker than those they look down upon), then we can accept all Jews as sisters and brothers, as was the case in pre-modern times, before the onset of late 19th-century racial anthropology, now discredited in the social sciences but not by the general public, Jewish or otherwise. If we continue to identify ourselves by race we risk the end of Judaism when, as it must eventually, the chimera of race and racial purity bursts as all illusory bubbles must.

Dr. Jordan Paper
Victoria, Canada
jpaper@uvic.ca

Dear Sirs,

Please may I ask for assistance in tracing my family who are believed to have been in China from about 1850 to about 1955.

The family name is BAUMZWEIGER also spelled BAUMZVEIGER (aka, Bejmcwaiger, Bomwiager) and are believed to have lived in Harbin (the capital of Heilongjiang Province) and also in

Shanghai. They may also have had some connection with cork carving work in the Fuzhou in Fujian province.

It seems that the BAUMZWEIGER originated in Warsaw (Poland), that one of the ancestors (Wolf, Ze'ev) was exiled to Siberia for some crimes (circa 1850) and that his descendants found their way in and out of China subsequently. Look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thank you.

Dr. Stephen Ankier (London - England)

sia@medreslaw.com

Dear Secretary,

I understand that your society may be able to assist me for information that may connect my late father with China. My name is Michael Felton and my father was Harry Felton - formerly Herschel (Harry) Felbrodt (d.1969). In 1917 he was one of a number of young men who had not acquired UK nationality and who were given the choice of joining UK forces; working in the coal mines or being returned to their country of origin.

I have two lines of enquiry:

1. I have read a book "War or Revolution" - ISBN 0-85303-707 (Cloth) - written by David Shuckman about the experiences of his late father and others who were sent back to Russia towards the end of WWI. In this book a "Harry" is mentioned. He would have been about my father's age at the time - 19 to 21 years. The book describes in part a journey to Vladivostok with the Czech Legion along the Trans Siberian railway.

At one time my father told my younger brother that he had met the Czechs but no detail was forthcoming. The journey to Eastern Russia and the difficulties of the fighters, refugees and anti Bolshevik forces does not signify a Chinese connection but it is inferred that many reached Shanghai.

2. However, I have in my possession two extracts possibly part of a series of articles that were published in the Shanghai Weekly on 9th March 1918. These describe initially the arrival of a ship, the *Czaritza* on 2nd November 1917 at Archangel and the position of young men from the U.K. The writer of the article is unknown but he was successful in reaching

Shanghai - hence the publication of his experiences. I cannot trace the Shanghai Weekly but imagine that it was a local paper that published in English for the benefit of non Chinese speakers or a section within say a local paper of a commercial nature for which 'foreigner's would have a need.

It may be the Shanghai Weekly no longer exists as such but it might have been subsumed by other papers despite the political change from 1935 to 1950 etc.

If your archives or records have any material that may be relevant, then I ask you to e-mail me.

If nothing turns up, then do you have any information if there is (or was) an English/Chinese paper/periodical publisher based in Singapore or Hong Kong that might have taken over the running of the Shanghai Weekly.

Yours truly,
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To the Editor,
On November 17, 2012 I presented my lecture/concert program THE UNDYING FLAME: BALLADS AND SONGS OF THE HOLOCAUST at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. This was the first time that a program of this sort had ever been presented in China, and I had no way of knowing how it would be received by a Chinese audience. To say that it was a memorable experience for me would be an understatement.

To judge by the rapt attention of the audience it would seem that it was a memorable experience for them as well. My spoken introductions to each song were translated into Mandarin, which, for me, added to the uniqueness of the proceedings. While the translations were being read by a member of the Museum staff (known to me only as Rita; I was introduced to the audience by the director Dr. Jian Chen) I had the opportunity to study the faces of the audience. As you will see in the video it is apparent that they were hanging on every word. In this audience of Chinese people of all ages, including university students, and some younger children, you will see two dis-

tinctly un-Chinese faces: My wife Tania and my son David. You will also note that I and everyone else are wearing plastic booties over our shoes to protect the floor of the Museum from scuffing.

If you go to the Museum's website (www.shanghaijews.org.cn) you will find a brief resumé of its fascinating history. Click on "News" and item 2 will open to the announcement of my concert.

The website (<http://www.travelchina.com/attraction/shanghai/jewish-refugees-museum.htm>) will lead to the Ohel Moshe Synagogue, which was built in 1927 to serve the Jewish community of Shanghai. The synagogue is now the site of the Museum. The "women's balcony," a fixture in traditional orthodox synagogues absorbed the overflow of the audience which filled the main floor, as you will see on the video. The program was especially adapted to suit the circumstances - allowing time for the translations of the introductions to the songs.

There are three links that will lead you to the concert video: <http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCfk8odEd9U2v-ijOHjvUmuA/videos> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQQhMfVehmY> or simply [jerry silverman shanghai video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQQhMfVehmY) which will lead you to the first link above.

For more information about the program in general please go to my website (www.jerrysilverman.org). If you have any questions or comments I would love to hear from you. I can be reached at sawmillmusic@optimum.net. Please pass this along to anyone you think would be interested in it.

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Missionaries Threaten Jewish Survival in Kaifeng

(continued from page 1)

the help of evangelical Finnish Christians. But no one, save this family and their sponsors, know if members of the family were baptized.

However, their most notable achievement to date has been the establishment of the Yiceleye (Israelite)⁴ School, the first Jewish school set up in Kaifeng in modern times.

The chief player in this endeavor is the founder of the school, an American Judeo-Christian named Timothy Lerner.

According to *The Virginian-Pilot*, while at Old Dominion University in the late 1990s, Lerner was president of Hatikvah, a small "messianic Jewish" student group.⁵ The article's author, Liz Szabo, reported that Lerner kept kosher, attended synagogue and comes from a family of Judeo-Christians—his parents are even Israeli citizens. But Lerner believes in Christianity and actively seeks to proselytize other Jews to both embrace Jesus as the messiah and follow Jewish customs and practices as did Jesus' first disciples, all of whom were Jews.

The setting may have changed—substitute Kaifeng for Old Dominion University—but the issue remains the same.

In 2000, Lerner was awarded a full scholarship to study abroad in China for the school year in order to pursue his studies at Shandong University in the city of Jinan. In 2002, Lerner returned to China and went to Kaifeng, reportedly in the company of the same Chinese Christian man from Beijing as had arranged for the Kaifeng Jewish family to make *aliyah*, and was introduced by him to members of the Jewish community. Lerner came back yet again to open the Yiceleye (Israelite) School, instructing the Jewish descendants in Hebrew, and gathering those interested for Shabbat dinners and festival celebrations.

More significantly, Lerner was able to arrange for a number of young Kaifeng Jews to receive scholarships to live and study in Israel with the help of the Israel-based organization Shavei Israel. Cooperation with Shavei Israel continued, enabling several other groups of young

work has largely been rediscovered in China. Goldblatt hopes to write the concluding volume and have them all translated.

After earning his doctorate, Goldblatt returned to San Francisco State University, where he taught until 1989. He translated several books while teaching a full-course load at San Francisco University. Often there was so little interest in Chinese writers that Goldblatt would give away his translations to small publishers for free. He began enjoying translating more and more.

"It's like Bach," Goldblatt said. "All of a sudden you say: 'I could listen to him all day long.' It just burrowed into the marrows of my bones. I loved doing translation."

At the same time across the world, Guam Moye, a soldier in the Chinese army, began to write. Born in 1955 in the Shandong Province, the setting that he would fictionalize in all of his novels, he dropped out of school as a 10-year-old and took the only path out of poverty in rural China for a young man: He joined the army. He took the penname Mo Yan, Chinese for "Don't Speak," based on the advice his father gave him during the chaotic time of the Cultural Revolution...

Goldblatt found one of his stories in a 1985 anthology of Chinese writers...[T]he story struck him as one of the first really authentic Chinese stories he'd read after the country's disastrous Cultural Revolution. Mo Yan's writing harked back to an earlier mode of Chinese folktales.

"They weren't new in Chinese literature; they were new in modern Chinese literature," Goldblatt said.

Months later, when Goldblatt visited Taipei a friend handed him a magazine with an excerpt of Mo Yan's *Garlic Ballads*. The book, an unflinching chronicle of a failed insurrection in a village, was initially banned in China, according to Goldblatt. Goldblatt sent a letter to Mo Yan, addressed simply to "Mo Yan, Peking" and the two began a correspondence that culminated in a translation of both *The Garlic Ballads* and *Red Sorghum*, which became a 1987 film by renowned director Zhang Yimou, starring Gong Li...

In 1989, Goldblatt left San Francisco State

for the University of Colorado. He retired in 2000 and married [his second wife Sylvia] Chen. [They now live in South Bend, Indiana where his wife teaches at the University of Notre Dame.]

...He continued translating Mo Yan: *The Republic of Wine* in 2000; *Big Breasts & Wide Hips* in 2005; and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* in 2006; along with a short story collection in 1999. Two more novels with Goldblatt's translations have just come out: *Pow!*, this month, and *Sandalwood Death*, last November...

Last month...Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in Literature...The prize was not without its share of controversy. Days after the award, writing in the *New York Times*, translator Jeffrey Yang and author Larry Siems accused Mo Yan of being a party hack and criticized the lack of support he's shown for other dissident Chinese writers. "Throughout his life he has done little to jeopardize his status as one of the country's most honored writers; he is currently vice chairman of the state-run Chinese Writers Association," they wrote.

Goldblatt didn't mince words about his thoughts on the article. "It was shallow, knee-jerk, and wrong-headed," he said over a plate of beet salad. "I like Yang, but his expectations were that Mo Yan should come out and tell the officials in China that they should take a flying fuck. You don't do that if you want to continue living and writing in China. You can do it there; in Israel, in a lot of places you can, but you can't do that there." Goldblatt continued, "What Mo Yan had going against him is that the government really loved the idea of him winning [the prize]."

While Yang and Siems see Mo Yan as being silent, Goldblatt instead sees a subtle, sophisticated critique of the Chinese government throughout Mo Yan's writing. Early in our conversation he mentioned the Fu poets, whose seemingly simple poetry were, on occasion, broadsided critiques of the ruling government.

"Now you know why writers of the Fu are the first in the anthologies and why so many of them were beheaded," he said. Mo Yan himself has made similar statements. "A writer should express criticism and indignation at the dark side of society and the ugliness of human na-

ture, but we should not use one uniform expression," he said at the 2009 Frankfurt Book Fair. "Some may want to shout on the street, but we should tolerate those who hide in their rooms and use literature to voice their opinions..."

Eran Barzilay Spearheads New Shavei Israel Projects for Kaifeng Jews

excerpted from the Shavei Israel website 19/02/2013: http://www.shavei.org/communities/kaifeng_jews
by Brian Blum



Eran Barzilay (back row) with some of the Chinese community in Kaifeng

Two years ago, following the devastating fire that ravished Israel's Carmel mountain range, the Jewish community in Kaifeng, China, decided it wanted to donate money to help rebuild the Yemin Orde Youth Village, which was at the epicenter of the fire. Eran Barzilay, a young Israeli, had been living in Kaifeng at the time studying Chinese at the local Henan University. On the community's behalf, he approached *Shavei Israel* to see if the organization could facilitate the transfer of funds.

That meeting launched an on-going cooperation between Barzilay, *Shavei* and the Kaifeng community which today includes a number of significant projects: a regular newsletter about Jewish topics entirely in Chinese; a scholarship for Jews who speak some Chinese to maintain contact with the community in Kaifeng; and soon, the launch of a platform for live, interactive, virtual courses over the Internet on Judaism in Chinese...

Barzilay was an East Asian studies major in 2010 when he first headed to China. When he heard about the Kaifeng community, he was immediately attracted.

From Kaifeng to Beit Hatfutsot

At an official ceremony held on November 14, 2012, a blue ceramic tile was handed to Beit Hatfutsot. The tile was part of the roof of a synagogue in Kaifeng, China that ceased to exist during the 19th century. Beit Hatfutsot displays a model of this synagogue in its permanent exhibition.

The synagogue in Kaifeng...was first built in 1163...[and] destroyed twice following flooding of the city by the Yellow River. In the 17th century, it was restored, but by the end of the 19th century it had fallen into disrepair and little by little the remnants of the synagogue were sold to missionaries and other houses of worship in Kaifeng.

This special tile was delivered by Dr. Wendy Abraham, an American scholar of China and member of SJI's Advisory Board, to Moti Schwartz, Acting Director of Beit Hatfutsot. "There is no question that this unique tile and the story that goes with it, have come to the right place. The exhibits at Beit Hatfutsot, The Museum of the Jewish People, display the amazing story and heritage of a people that dispersed throughout the world and still managed to preserve its culture and heritage...This tile will assume its rightful place in the new exhibit," Moti Schwartz concluded upon receiving the archaeological find from Dr. Abraham.

Dr. Wendy Abraham, who came to Beit Hatfutsot accompanied by an academic colleague, Noam Urbach, currently a doctoral candidate at Bar Ilan University, reported with emotion, that the tile, whose color has somewhat faded, was bequeathed to her by the former curator of the Kaifeng Museum for research purposes by western scholars, and was given to her during a visit to China in 1997...Dr. Abraham spoke about how moved she was by this moment at Beit Hatfutsot and how important it was to her to deliver the tile that has been with her for over 15 years to a Jewish institution in Israel that deals with preserving the heritage of the Jewish people. According to Dr. Abraham, Beit Hatfutsot is unquestionably the right place for it. In her remarks Dr. Abraham noted that items from the synagogue are exhibited at the Royal Museum in Toronto and preservation centers in Kaifeng.



Mo Yan's Jewish Interpreter

by Michael Orbach
excerpted from *Tablet Magazine*, 12/10/2012, www.tablet.com

[Howard] Goldblatt, 74, is the foremost Chinese-English translator in the world. Over the course of his almost 40-year career, he has translated more than 50 books, edited several anthologies of Chinese writings; received two NEA fellowships, a Guggenheim grant and nearly every other translation award. In the first four years of the Man Asian Literary Prize, three of the winners were translations by Goldblatt...

Goldblatt was born in Long Beach, Calif., in 1939 to what he describes as a "super-low middle class" Jewish family. His father worked a variety of jobs from a jewelry seller to a watch repairman. Goldblatt's grandfather had been wiped out by the Great Depression, so his father had a conservative streak.

"He risked nothing," Goldblatt said. "We always had what we needed but we never had what we didn't need." In school, Goldblatt was a failure. "I dated a lot; I

drank a lot. I got D's, C's, and maybe an F." He managed to get a degree from a local community college and, realizing that he'd be drafted anyway, signed up for officer school in the Navy. After completing his training, Goldblatt was sent to Taipei...

When his stint was over in 1965, the signs of a war in Vietnam were becoming imminent. The Navy asked him to continue on; he agreed so long as he could go back to Taipei... He enrolled in Taiwan's Normal Academy and met his first wife (they have two daughters who live in San Francisco...). During his time there he was given the Chinese name that he still goes by: Ge Heowen, which means "Vast Literary Talent."

"It was the best name ever given to a foreigner," he laughed.

When his father died in 1968, Goldblatt flew back home. He had no idea what to do with himself, and a former teacher recommended he go to graduate school. Only one graduate school accepted him: San Francisco State. After receiving his Masters he pursued a doctorate at Indiana University. His focus was 14th-century Chinese Drama, but he gradually

broadened it to include modern Chinese literature as well.

Over the course of his studies, he fell in love with the work of a writer by the name of Xiao Hong, the pseudonym of Zhang Naiying...Xiao Hong was the turning point. At the time of Goldblatt's discovery, she was largely forgotten. Her life had been brief and tragic. Born in Manchuria in 1911; she fled an arranged marriage, but her fiancé found her, impregnated her, and then abandoned her. She narrowly avoided being sold as a prostitute by finding work at a newspaper and beginning to write stories. She became a disciple of Lu Xun, considered to be the father of Modern Chinese literature. While fleeing from the Japanese, she became ill and underwent unnecessary throat surgery that left her speechless before eventually killing her.

"She was my muse," Goldblatt explained. "I wrote a lot of essays about her; I translated a couple of her novels." At the end of her life, she wrote a novel and a sequel about a character by the name of Ma Bole, whose journeys in the book mirrored her own. "There was no question she wanted to make it a trilogy," he said. Thanks to his efforts, Xaio Hong's

Kaifeng Jews to go to Israel.⁶ This greatly increased Lerner's prestige among the Kaifeng Jewish families who, owing to the depressed economic conditions in Kaifeng, saw Israel as the land of economic and educational opportunity. Lerner remained in Kaifeng for about two years until his visa was revoked by the Chinese government for evangelizing and he was expelled. Nonetheless, he somehow still manages to return to Kaifeng on a regular basis, often for weeks at a time.

Almost immediately however suspicions were aroused among some of the Kaifeng Jews about Lerner's intentions. Shi Lei, the first Kaifeng Jew ever to study in Israel, both at Bar Ilan University and at a Jerusalem yeshiva, was the first to sound the alarm. He blames Lerner for "creating factions" with his school and for proselytizing the still Jewishly-uneducated and somewhat naïve community. For a while Shi Lei sought to counter Lerner's influence by operating a small school of his own until his work as a travel guide took him away from Kaifeng too much. He remains a strong critic.

In 2004, Israeli Michael Freund, head of Shavei Israel, and two Orthodox Israeli rabbis, Shlomo Riskin, chief rabbi of Efrat, and Eliyahu Birnbaum, a representative of the Israeli Ministry of Religions, led a delegation to visit Kaifeng and found no evidence of proselytizing materials or activities at the school. When asked directly, Lerner denied to their faces that he had any Christian beliefs, tendencies or affiliations.

When I visited Kaifeng in 2009 as president of the Sino-Judaic Institute, I likewise saw nothing that would raise my suspicions, but stories and rumors abounded. For example, one of Shi Lei's students told me that he was offered a substantial sum of money plus the opportunity to visit Israel by some English missionaries if he would sign up for their 45 day crash course in Christianity. He refused. Others told stories about the family that had moved to Israel and were reportedly baptized.

Although SJI had been informed about the Yiceleye School via its contacts in Kaifeng, nothing had been said about the "messianic" tendencies of the school's founder nor were we aware of the extent of Christian influence and proselytizing

of the Kaifeng Jewish community.

When I learned that the school's rent was being paid by a Hong Kong Christian church, I asked SJI to take over paying the rent and emailed the Hong Kong group of our interest in cooperating. Its correspondent, a Mr. Jackie Li, responded: *"I'm not under any ministry or organisation and not supported by any church directly. My fellowship agrees anyway what I'm doing. Our fellowship mainly cares about the poor and the drug addicts. I have few brothers and sisters walking together with me in same heart for the Jews in China. Without HIM we can do nothing...Father God showed me a dream in beginning of 2005 about the KF, the bookstore street (ancient buildings). HE said "Don't wait anymore, go there, stand with them and bring them back to ME back to the Land". I had never been to Kaifeng before this dream. My first trip to KF did really match the dream. I walked in book street, my tears run down and I said to GOD "yes, yes"."*

Despite his stated desire to work with SJI, nonetheless, as soon as SJI and other Jewish groups got involved, his group stopped paying the rent completely and we had to step into the breach. I wondered if his group ceased its support because it had been found out or because we Jews were stepping up to support our own.

After Lerner was expelled, Zohar Milchgrub, an Israeli Chinese Studies major, visited Kaifeng and remained there to teach Hebrew for several months at the Yiceleye School. He was there when I visited and helped me try to heal the rift in the community caused by Lerner's Judeo-Christian theology. When Milchgrub left, a young American Jew, Eric Rothberg, took his place. Working there for a year enabled Rothberg to uncover more about Lerner. Not only did he find a "Jesus prayer" at the school but he became so distraught with Lerner's continuing influence that he convinced a large segment of the community to leave and form its own school, Beit HaTikvah. SJI, Kulanu and other Jewish groups transferred their support to the new school but Lerner's school continues to flourish with the support of Hong Kong Christians.

Besides theology, there is another significant difference between the two schools. The Yiceleye School operates in secret

while Beit HaTikvah has a sign above its door as a public announcement about its existence. A major reason for this is that Beit HaTikvah is a center for authentic Jewish cultural education in Kaifeng, while the Yiceleye School, with the involvement of the Hong Kong Christians, is in fact a proselytizing effort, something forbidden under Chinese law—and something for which Lerner has already been expelled once.

Rothberg also reported that he had heard from two individuals attending Beit HaTikvah that one Kaifeng Jew who was close with the Hong Kong Christians had organized a trip for some Kaifeng Jews to visit a few Hong Kong Christian churches, where they all prayed, probably not realizing that they were practicing Christianity. Another bit of evidence reported to SJI is that, during Pesach festivities of the Yiceleye group, a large number of Hong Kong Christians were present, all wearing *kippot* and saying that they believed in Judaism.

This is standard practice for Judeo-Christians and Christian missionaries who, in effect are saying: "We believe in the Old Testament, we support observance of God's commandments, we love Jews, we love Israel. We aren't like other Christians, we also believe in Judaism..." all the while plying the Kaifeng Jews with gifts of fish-adorned *mezuzot*, calendars praising the reign of Jesus, and especially the lure of going to Israel. It is a slow, insinuating process but what they are espousing is a syncretistic Christian theology wrapped in an outward Jewish practice. This has been the constant in the history of their involvement in Kaifeng since the 19th century: first lure the Kaifeng Jews back to Judaism, then slide them over to Judeo-Christianity and ultimately to Christianity plain and simple.

According to Bob Davis, in a *Wall Street Journal* article dated 16 August 2011, Lerner "says he doesn't try to convince anyone to follow his religious beliefs". He says he set up the "Kaifeng Israel School" to help Kaifeng Jews "learn the Jewish lifestyle" and move to Israel, where about a dozen of them have taken up residence, thanks largely to funds from Shavei Israel, the Israel-based organization which is dedicated to returning "lost Jews" to the Jewish homeland—a Zionist mission that coincides, pragmatically, with that of the Judeo-Christians and their

Christian supporters, who also seek the return of all Jews to the Land of Israel. Shavei Israel, it must be noted, is in no way a Christian or Judeo-Christian organization, although it works with them to accomplish its own ends.

Economic advancement is the key motivator for the Kaifeng Jews and anyone with the power to get young Kaifeng Jews to Israel will wield significant influence in Kaifeng. Kaifeng Jews want their young men and women to go to Israel to study and/or to make *aliyah*, because both are means to economic advancement, opportunities for which are lacking in Kaifeng. This accounts in large part to the draw of Lerner's school and contributes to the continued presence and influence of Christian missionaries in Kaifeng. Lerner, both through his evangelical Christian associations in Europe and messianic Jewish relations in Israel, and his links with the well-intentioned Shavei Israel group, has the proven ability to make this happen.

Rothberg, who now serves on the SJI Board of Directors, believes that the only way to eliminate Christian influence in the community is to fully support the community's wishes to send their children to Israel and also to support the Beit HaTikvah School as an alternative to the Judeo-Christian Yiceleye School. Others on the SJI Board want to create employment opportunities in Kaifeng in addition to supporting those Kaifeng Jews who want to go to Israel, but nothing concrete has emerged (yet). SJI wants Kaifeng Jews to have choices: to learn about their cultural heritage in an undistorted way; to remain in China and/or go to Israel to study or live.

One might think that once a Kaifeng Jew comes to Israel that s/he is safe from the missionaries' influence. But there is evidence that their proselytizing continues even in Israel. Although Lerner is not able to influence Kaifeng Jews now in Israel as directly as he does in Kaifeng, he still can maintain a role in their lives once they obtain Israeli citizenship and are free to associate with him once again. Consider what one Kaifeng Jewish woman, now an Israeli citizen, had to say about him: "During my time in Israel a lot of people helped us. Like Timothy and his whole family, they treated us as if we were a member of their family. Now, we have a wonderful life in Israel." Lerner

can easily connect the Kaifeng Jews in Israel with one of the estimated 120 Judeo-Christian congregations, comprising some 10,000-15,000 believers, which operate there.

Rothberg was in Israel in autumn of 2012. He recalled that, while walking on Jerusalem's Ben Yehuda Street one evening, he had a "serendipitous" experience: He had just walked past all the seven students from Kaifeng attending Shavei Israel's yeshiva program when he recognized Mr. Jackie Li, one of the leaders of the Hong Kong Chinese Christian group supporting the Yiceleye school, whom he had personally gotten to know in Kaifeng. Li was talking to the whole group, smiling, and taking pictures with them. As Rothberg continued looking at the group, he realized that Lerner was there as well, "keeping a low profile as usual, with his baseball cap pulled low as if meaning to hide his face."⁷ The group looked rather jovial, and Rothberg did not interrupt their reunion—nor would he have been welcomed by Lerner, who has never forgiven him for breaking apart the Yiceleye School and exposing his Judeo-Christian agenda.

Here in the USA, Lerner maintains a website for his Kaifeng activities, The Association of Kaifeng Jews: <http://www.theakj.org/>. According to the website, "the Association of Kaifeng Jews (AKJ) is a not-for-profit, nondenominational 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to assisting the Jews of Kaifeng, China." It claims, falsely, to be "the only organization solely dedicated to assisting the Kaifeng Jewish community." It has three goals, all laudable: it is dedicated to helping the Kaifeng Jews better understand their Jewish heritage and faith; it seeks to help those Kaifeng Jews who wish to return to the Land of Israel (*aliyah*), and their Jewish faith; and it also supports different religious and social activities in Kaifeng in order to help foster a communal spirit amongst the Kaifeng Jews. Nowhere is Lerner's Christian theology on display—although he does speak regularly about the Kaifeng Jews on the U.S. Judeo-Christian lecture circuit.

[There is also another Judeo-Christian website hailing from Singapore devoted to things Chinese and Jewish — <http://www.messianic-torah-truth-seeker.org/zanmeiyeshua-Moshiach/Chinese-jews.html>, which is an odd pastiche of

Biblical quotations and studies, Judaica, Christianity and Kaifeng Jewish history. It also offers the following: "If you are Chinese Jew, We have here with us a Chinese Jew you can write to: Micah" (mcaki@hotmail.com).]

So here is the conundrum: Timothy Lerner has done good work in Kaifeng. He opened the first Jewish school there and taught Kaifeng Jews basic Hebrew, Jewish history and Jewish culture. He helped send a number of young Kaifeng Jews to Israel, where they remain, either converted to traditional Judaism or are still learning about it. Although supported by Hong Kong missionaries and Judeo-Christians, he seems to have softened his theology in Kaifeng—however what he does there and in Israel remains of deep concern.

Back in 2009, I introduced myself to Lerner in an email and invited him to a) write an article for Points East about his experiences teaching in Kaifeng and his observations and conclusions about the community there, and b) clarify who he is and what his intentions were for the public record. I expressed the hope that we could work together to help the Kaifeng Jewish descendants reconnect with their Jewish roots and begin to thrive again as a community. Lerner wrote back: "Dear Rabbi Laytner, I apologize for the late response. Thank you for the opportunity to write for your journal, but I respectfully decline the offer."

It is time for Lerner to be honest: He should be open and truthful about his faith and his ultimate intentions in Kaifeng. Evidence of a sincere desire to help the Kaifeng Jews without ulterior Christian motives would be the removal of all Christian-related materials and objects from the Yiceleye School, the severing of relations with the Hong Kong Chinese Christians both in Kaifeng and Israel, and working cooperatively and openly with us. Otherwise, let him proclaim his school as a Judeo-Christian missionary effort so that the Kaifeng Jews can make an informed choice as to which school to attend. For now, there is enough evidence to show that conversion is his ultimate goal, just as it was with Bishop White so long ago.

In 1992, Israel's first ambassador to China, Dr. Zev Sufott arranged a trip to Kaifeng on his first official visit to a Chi

However, in order to build a general picture of the character of the convert, I will mention a few central and important items. As already mentioned, the court must be convinced that the candidate accepts the following upon himself: faith in God, distancing from all forms and any hint of idolatry including the trinity of Christianity, as well as all three cardinal sins—idolatry, adultery, and murder; observance of the seven Laws of Noah; minimal observance of traditional mitzvot such as Kiddush on Shabbat, fasting on Yom Kippur, refraining from hametz on Pessah, and similar practices. These are the most important elements that constitute the foundations of the religion and are not difficult even for a person who is just taking his first steps of living in a Jewish lifestyle. In general, it can be said that Jews who call themselves "traditional" fulfill these mitzvot...

What Can Be Done?

In writing my book, *Zera Yisrael*, I invested a great deal of thought and made the utmost efforts to uphold the truths of halakha. The ideas in the book were also brought before Torah sages so they could offer their opinions. Through discussions with them the words were carefully chosen and put into print. As a summary of the book's content, I underscored four important points regarding conversion as agreed upon by a majority of halakhic authorities:

- 1) The convert must accept the responsibility of mitzvot.
- 2) It must be clear that the potential convert's true intention is to be a Jew with belief in the unity of God, the prohibition of idolatry, a rejection and distancing from his or her previous faith, and accepting some of the lighter and stricter mitzvot that the court presents.
- 3) It is not necessary to know at the time of the conversion that a potential convert plans to observe everything, nor does the convert need to explicitly commit to complete observance.
- 4) If it is evident that the potential convert has no intention to observe mitzvot (for example, if one lives on a secular kibbutz where one will continue to desecrate the Shabbat, eat non-Kosher food, eat hametz on Pessah, and live exactly as one did prior to the conversion), then that person cannot be converted.

These are the points that must be adopted by anyone involved in conversion in the State of Israel. Establishing the process of conversion in the State of Israel based on these points will provide a solution to the conversion problems of the vast majority of the immigrants of *zera yisrael* who want to convert. For this to occur, we need a strong and courageous Chief Rabbinate that seeks a path to solve the problems that lay at its doorstep.

Without wishing to cause fear or panic, I firmly believe that if we do not follow the lenient path provided by halakha (in the spirit of our sages, who taught that "the power to make things permissible is better," Gittin 41b), then we will be faced with innumerable problems relating to Jewish identity, marriage, and divorce.

During the past several decades, policies on conversion have become highly publicized in the media. Rabbis and judges who espouse the lenient view are subjected to severe pressures from those who take a stringent view. Many who favor the lenient position become intimidated, and choose not to oppose the needlessly stringent policies that have gained credence within much of the rabbinic community. It is a fact that many of these rabbis lack the courage to stand up against the rabbinical, political, and media apparatus of the strict camp; therefore, most of them simply fall in line and remain silent.

A situation of this kind is inimical to the interests of the Torah world. Halakhic disputes must never devolve into antagonisms between people, political parties, or ideologies. Abstaining from conveying a halakhic opinion from fear of "what will they say?" goes against the philosophy of the Torah and halakha...To withhold one's halakhic opinion, or to intimidate another to withhold his opinion, border on *hilul Hashem*—a desecration of God's name.

Great thought, passion, and a feeling of a religious mission are required to fight this holy battle. One must follow the teaching that "let the weak say, I am strong" (Joel 3:10) and "in a place where there is no man strive to be a man" (Avot 2:5) and raise a true and clear voice without fear. This voice is based on the trustworthy foundations of the great medieval and modern commentators and on the con-

tinuous flow of halakhic decisions of the great teachers in later generations.

Summary

This essay has raised the following basic points:

- 1) According to most early halakhic authorities, not informing the convert about the mitzvot or his not accepting the mitzvot do not nullify the conversion retroactively.
- 2) Even according to the opinion that this does nullify the conversion retroactively, the conversion is not conditional upon his actual fulfillment of the mitzvot in practice.
- 3) That same opinion only requires an awareness that the convert will fulfill some of the mitzvot after conversion.
- 4) We should be lenient with regard to conversions of non-Jews who live in Israel, are involved in Jewish society, speak Hebrew, and who will choose to marry Jews. Such candidates for conversion should only be required to go through those aspects of the conversion process that are absolutely mandatory and whose omission would invalidate the conversion.
- 5) All the more so, must we be lenient with the conversions of those who have Jewish roots, as is the case with the overwhelming majority of immigrants from the former Soviet Union who received Israeli citizenship and who are in the halakhic category of *zera yisrael*.
- 6) The court that arranges the conversions must be composed of Torah scholars who will oversee the conversion according to Jewish law. The conversions are valid even if done in the presence of three laymen, as long as they fulfilled all the necessary steps in the conversion process.
- 7) These conclusions are written based on the opinion of most earlier and later halakhic authorities. The full discussion and actual sources are found in my published volumes on this topic.
- 8) The tradition of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has historically been to deal leniently in this era of the ingathering of the exiles. They did not check up on converts to determine if they were fulfilling the mitzvot or not; as long as candidates for conversion demonstrated the wish to be Jewish and the judges were convinced of their sincerity, the conversions were performed without hesitation.

nese city outside of Beijing. By no stretch of the Israeli imagination could he accept that the "approved" Kaifeng Jew he met was a Jew and, based on his visit, Suftott advised both the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency to do nothing to help the Kaifeng Jews lest it damage nascent Israeli-Chinese relations. That policy remains in place to this day⁴ and there is wisdom to it on the state-to-state level.

Nonetheless, in the intervening twenty years, the Kaifeng Jews have experienced a rebirth as China has opened up and it is incumbent on Israel and Diaspora Jews to help them reconnect with their all-but-vanished heritage.

We had hoped that the creation of the Beit HaTikvah school/community would lead to the demise of the Yiceleye School but to date this has not been the case. About 50 individuals attend Beit HaTikvah regularly while about twice that number are associated, at least occasionally, with the Yiceleye School. Lerner continues his efforts to take students away from Beit HaTikvah by meeting with various family members during his visits to Kaifeng and dangling the lure of Israel before them.

Beit HaTikvah is a haven for genuine Jewish culture in Kaifeng. Besides helping to fund the facility, SJI and Kulanu also provide on-line instruction in Chinese and English on a variety of Jewish subjects and Shavei Israel has enabled young Israelis to teach in Kaifeng for months at a time. But more is needed and time is of the essence.

If a living Jewish presence is to survive in Kaifeng, an appropriately trained Chinese/English/Hebrew speaking teacher and community organizer needs to be hired and placed on site as soon as possible. (Ideally s/he would be a Kaifeng Jew.) Henan province and the city of Kaifeng have intermittently expressed an interest in helping revive the Jewish community, if only for the economic benefits that tourism would bring. But foreign Jews will only visit Kaifeng if there are living Kaifeng Jews with whom to meet—otherwise there are more artifacts to see at the Royal Ontario Museum in

Toronto than in Kaifeng. The presence of a full-time teacher and community organizer could transform the situation in Kaifeng, simultaneously curtailing the influence of the Christian missionaries and serving as an on-going catalyst for a revival of a real Jewish community there, which in turn would provide tourism-related jobs for Jews and Han Chinese alike in Kaifeng.

Beit HaTikvah is probably the last best chance for the Kaifeng Jews to connect legitimately with their Jewish heritage. There is but one Jewish school in Kaifeng and time will tell if it is strong enough to survive against the powerful Judeo-Christian—Hong Kong Christ

¹ Chinese Recorder [Shanghai], November 1919, pp. 780-82. Cited in Michael Pollak, *Mandarin, Jews and Missionaries*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980, note 4, p. 397.

² I use the term "Judeo-Christian" to refer to those Jews who have embraced Jesus as the messiah and those Christians who have embraced Jewish ritual observance as a way of connecting with Jesus. It is worth noting that, historically, both tendencies were considered heretical. "Messianic-Jews" is a more common expression for "Jews for Jesus" but, as a friend pointed out, messianic Judaism might also refer to those parts of the Chabad movement who believe their last Rebbe is/was Mashiach.

³ Noam Urbach, "Kaifeng Jews Between Revival and Obliteration," in Peter Kupler, ed., *Youtai—Presence and Perception of Jews and Judaism in China*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 115-116.

⁴ Yiceleye is the Chinese word used in ancient Kaifeng Jewish texts to refer to their community, which I have chosen to render "Israelite". Yisilite is the Chinese word for the modern state of Israel.

⁵ The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA), 20 February 1999.

⁶ M. Avrum Ehrlich and Liang Pingan, "The Condition of the Jewish Descendants of Kaifeng," in M. Avrum Ehrlich, ed. *The Jewish-Chinese Nexus*, London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 188-191.

⁷ M. Avrum Ehrlich confirms Rothberg's perception of Lerner's propensity for secrecy, his need for control and his fear/paranoia of being exposed. See "Condition", pp. 189-190.

⁸ Urbach, "Kaifeng Jews Between Revival and Obliteration," pp. 99-100. Sadly, the American Joint Distribution Committee has chosen to follow the Israeli government's position regarding the Kaifeng Jews.

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Zera Yisrael as the New Basis for Conversion

(continued from page 1)

According to the way of Torah and halakha, there is plenty of room for an approach that will provide a solution that will help pull the wagon of conversions out from the "mud" in which it is currently stuck.

Not doing so will lead us down a path filled with fences and barriers and will in the end destroy the unity of our people... This demands the courage and valor to think differently, and all must be done with a strong adherence to the truth of Torah as understood by the classic commentaries.

Zera Yisrael—Jewish Ancestry

The key to understanding the halakhic basis for the conversion of immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the framework of either military or civilian conversion is the designation of "zera yisrael" (Jewish seed/ancestry). This means that even though a person born to a non-Jewish mother is not halakhically Jewish, if his father or grandfather is Jewish, he is described as coming from zera yisrael.

The halakhic implication of the designation of zera yisrael enables us to deal differently with people who have Jewish blood flowing through their veins than we do with other individuals who wish to convert. We can be more lenient with them despite the fact that before they convert, they are non-Jews, halakhically speaking. These people must be dealt with differently for they are the "outcasts" (nidakhim) and "lost ones" (ovdim)...

The designation of zera yisrael not only enables us to be more lenient with conversion, but even demands that we reach out to these people. The Rashbash (Solomon ben Simon Duran, c. 1400–1467, Algiers) wrote in his responsa (368)... that we should actively bring them close and under the wings of God's Presence. Similar decisions were also published by leading rabbis...

That said, in regard to those who immigrated under the Law of Return with non-Jewish mothers, it is a mitzvah to bring these souls closer and to convert them

even when it is not clear to us whether they will accept the fundamentals of Judaism with a full heart.

Therefore, any discussion about conversion of people who immigrated based on the Law of Return cannot be disconnected from the unique distinction of "Jewish descent." Amazingly, in all the discussions of the sages in modern times regarding conversion and acceptance of mitzvot they made no distinction between an ordinary non-Jew who comes to convert and someone with Jewish heritage. Many have gone so far as to say that "acceptance of mitzvot" means that the convert must obligate himself to observe all mitzvot. This has led to their quick retraction of conversions since they believe that if the convert transgresses just some mitzvot then their conversion is null and void.

There are many great rabbis in our generation who agree in principle that we should be more lenient with those with Jewish roots than we are with other candidates for conversion. However, with regard to the fundamental of "acceptance of mitzvot," they make no distinction between them and others. They are simply unaware of the opinions of the earlier sages regarding the significance of having Jewish heritage and ancestry.

This is why the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel, felt the need to write in his Responsa Mishpetei Uziel (7:19, 4) that, according to all opinions, people of Jewish descent born to non-Jewish mothers are called "Jewish seed." He went even further and wrote, "From all this we have learned that the condition of fulfilling the mitzvot does not prevent a conversion even to begin with... from all that has been said we learn that it is permissible and a mitzvah to accept converts even though we know that they will not fulfill all the mitzvot."

My approach, to which many great Torah sages agree, assures that, on the one hand we bring close anyone of Jewish stock and help find permissible ways according to halakha to convert them, while, on the other hand, not rushing to usher non-Jews who are not of Jewish heritage into our nation. This approach, in my humble opinion, is correct according to halakha and is proper for the situation of the Jewish people in our times. I believe that in the future, with God's help, this approach will solve the prob-

lem of the non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union who live in our midst in Israel. It is possible that segments in the Torah world will combat this approach, but I hope that those who are involved with the Torah of truth for the sake of Heaven will grab hold of this true path...

Acceptance of Mitzvot

The primary dispute regarding conversion in the State of Israel revolves around the concept of Kabbalat haMitzvot, acceptance of mitzvot. Accepting the mitzvot is one of the three central elements in the conversion process. It is clear that any attempt to circumvent halakha by accepting converts with no acceptance of mitzvot is a distortion of halakha and will not succeed.

"Acceptance of mitzvot" means accepting the fundamentals of Judaism. It is not simply a commitment to fulfill the mitzvot. Its full meaning is a desire to be a Jew with all the implications that accompany the fact that the convert will now be called a Jew. This desire must manifest itself with the acceptance of mitzvot, which testifies to the transformation that occurs within the convert. From the moment of the conversion and onward, the convert must behave like a Jew and feel connected to the Jewish people. However, we can assume that just as among those who are born Jewish, there are the more righteous, the average, and others, so, too, among converts there will be many types.

There can be no policy or process of conversion that skips over the step of "acceptance of mitzvot." According to all halakhic opinions, the convert must accept the mitzvot. Therefore, it is impossible to issue a halakhic decision that a Jewish court should carry out conversions without an acceptance of mitzvot—something I have been charged with by those who oppose me. After we tell the convert some of the mitzvot imposed on a Jew along with the significance of the responsibility involved with conversion, he or she must verbally accept the mitzvot taught without any reservations. If the individual says that he or she is not prepared to accept even one mitzvah then we do not accept that person as a convert. This is agreed to by all halakhic authorities without dispute...

Given all of the above, what is the debate? It revolves around a person who comes to convert according to halakha, but it appears that the person's post-conversion lifestyle is not one of mitzvah observance. Some argue that this demonstrates that when the person declared that he or she would accept mitzvot in front of the Jewish court, this was not a real acceptance since there was never the full intention to observe all the mitzvot. They go even further and claim that a court that accepts a candidate of this kind and converts him has collaborated in this wrongdoing. In their opinion, the fact that both sides knew beforehand that the convert would not observe all mitzvot means that the convert's words were empty of meaning and this court has, de facto, performed a conversion without an acceptance of mitzvot.

In my book, *Zera Yisrael*, I wrote against this approach at great length and proved that all we require from the convert is a verbal acceptance of the mitzvot without any qualifications. If, after hearing the mitzvot, one accepts them along with an honest expression of one's desire to be a Jew and to become part of the "inheritance of God" and endure sufferings that may afflict the Jewish people, that person is absolutely to be considered a person who has "accepted the mitzvot." After these things have been done, there is no place, according to halakha, to test the person's intentions or for the court to make sure that this person plans to observe mitzvot in the future. There is simply no such concept in halakha. Therefore, we can establish definitively that even if an individual is lacking in mitzvot observance in practice, this does not detract from his acceptance of mitzvot, and that individual is still considered to be a valid convert.

I brought decisive and clear proofs in my books mentioned above—reinforced by quotations from well-known halakhic authorities who wrote as such explicitly. Even more importantly, though, is that this has been the practice of the rabbinic courts of the Sephardic sages throughout the generations as well as the widespread practice of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate in former years...

It is difficult to qualify precisely the level of observance that a convert must accept,