

conducted business at the race-track, sometimes on a handshake! World War II abruptly terminated their privileged lifestyle. In 1943, the Japanese interned the Benjamins for nearly three years in a POW camp. Along with other internees they endured great hardship and loss of all worldly possessions. In 1948, shortly before the Communist takeover, the Benjamins relocated to Hong Kong, where the ensuing Korean War embargo eventually caused their irreparable financial collapse. In 1951 the family immigrated to Israel. Ester managed, between 1987 and 2004, to tape three interviews of her parents, which yielded 100 transcribed pages of invaluable information for use in her book.

Ester served two years in the Israeli army, married a South African, and spent thirty-six years in South Africa. After spending five years in Canada, Ester immigrated to the USA in 1997 and now lives in Los Angeles, California. Ester Benjamin Shifren is an author, artist, musician, and dynamic international speaker. In 2005, in England, she was featured in the BBC1

program "We'll Meet Again," and was a guest lecturer for several days at the Imperial War Museum.

Review

Ester Benjamin Shifren's book is unique. Most personal journals detailing the lives of the Jews in Shanghai during World War II deal with Ashkenazi refugees from Europe forced to flee the Nazis. They become a stateless people ultimately squeezed into the squalor of the Hongkew Ghetto.

This is not the case with Shifren. Her family was not from Europe, and not Ashkenazi, but Sephardi. She was born in China as her family had arrived in Shanghai from India in 1840, and thrived there for five generations. Her affluent family — including wealthy entrepreneurs, diplomats, and racehorse owners — were not stateless, but citizens of Great Britain. Rather than experiencing the war in the Hongkew Ghetto, they were sequestered for three dismal years of extreme deprivation and degradation in a Japanese internment camp because, as

British citizens, they were considered enemies of Japan.

So here we have a firsthand account of the enjoyment and then sudden termination of a privileged, opulent life style. We see the expected horrors of the POW camp and the unexpected but dismaying anti-Semitism of the British towards the Jews throughout and after the war in a fascinating book which starts long before the Holocaust and extends from Shanghai to Hong Kong and beyond at War's end. It is indeed a riveting examination of the extremes endured by this family set against insights into pre and post war China, enhanced by many family photos.

Shifren is a skilled author, bringing to life all the bustle of teeming Shanghai and all the devastation of being a POW as she weaves her personal memoir into the larger historical picture. It is an unforgettable saga, well researched, and highly recommended.

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Points East

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

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THE ALIYAH ROADBLOCK IN ISRAEL

by Andrew Sacks
excerpted from

<http://www.blogs.jpost.com/users/masorti-matters>

Dec 12, 2012

1. Aliyah: Converts get the run-around

Imagine the Israeli government blocking a Jew from observing Kashrut, putting on Tefilin, or lighting the Hanukah lights.

Sounds absurd. Even for Israel which is home to the absurd.

There is a Mitzvah to make Aliyah. The Mitzvah is known as Yeshuv HaAretz. A Jew is obligated to build the land of Israel. Yes, there are disputes as to whether the commandment is Torahitic or Rabbinic. There are also disagreements as to how one may fulfill this obligation. But make no mistake – living in Israel allows one to fulfill more Mitzvot than living elsewhere.

This Mitzvah is no less an obligation for those who are Jews by Choice than those born into Judaism. The law of the State of Israel, as interpreted by the highest court in the land, has held that converts of non-Orthodox denominations must be given the same rights under the Law of Return as those who convert through the Orthodox movements and those born Jewish.

Yet our very own Interior Ministry - in the hands of an ostensibly religious political party (SHAS) – has blocked far too many who wish to fulfill their obligation of Yeshuv HaAretz. At a time when Aliyah has slowed to a trickle one would expect that we would welcome potential Olim (immigrants) with open arms. With so many "religious" men, zealously Orthodox, avoiding military service, one might think we would embrace a Jew by Choice seeking to serve in the IDF. But this is just not so.

Who is at fault? I take my hat off to the fine people at the Jewish Agency's Aliyah department. They work faithfully to fulfill their mandate to bring Jews to Israel. They do the preparation work and hand in completed files to the Interior Ministry personnel who need only issue the OK. But that OK may take a long time. A very long time. In the interim the life of the potential Oleh may be put on hold as they are unable to make plans without the green light from this ministry. Does the Oleh

7 CHINESE JEWS REJOIN THE JEWISH PEOPLE

by Brian Blum

excerpted from the Shavei Israel website: http://www.shavei.org/communities/kaifeng_jews/articles-kaifeng_jews_13/12/2012

1. Tony

As he stood before the Jerusalem Rabbinical Court answering the final question before completing a crucial last step on the road towards his long awaited conversion to Judaism, Tony Liang was thrown a curveball.



Hoshea (Tony) Liang at the mikveh with Rabbi Menachem Weinberg

"What's the blessing on an eggroll?" the rabbinic judge asked the young man from Kaifeng, China. Tony looked perplexed.

It turns out that the Chinese, at least those in remote Kaifeng, don't eat eggrolls; it's a western variation on Asian food. The judge opened his laptop, did a Google search for "eggroll," and showed Tony the picture.

Tony immediately got the blessing right. The judges instructed him to cover his eyes and recite *Shema Israel*. As he did so, Tony came one giant leap closer to the dream he's nurtured since childhood: to live a fully Jewish life in the Land of Israel.

Tony Liang is one of seven descendants of the Kaifeng Jewish community who have been studying Judaism and Hebrew in Israel for the past two and a half years with *Shavei Israel's* help...

For most of their time in Israel, the seven Chinese men have been studying at *Yeshivat HaMivtar*, part of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin's *Ohr Torah* Institutions in Efrat, under the supervision of Rabbi Menachem Weinberg. Rabbi Weinberg deemed the men to be ready for their "interviews" at the *Beit Din* (Rabbinical Court) this past Thursday and "they passed with flying

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SJI MEMBERSHIP

Country	Total
United States	178
China	18
Israel	17
Canada	14
England	5
Australia	3
Germany	3
Japan	2
South Africa	2
France	1
Indonesia	1
Switzerland	1
Taiwan	1

TOTAL: 246

FROM THE EDITOR

By the time you read this, historic things will have happened in Kaifeng.

Acting on their own, the members of the Yicileye School and the Beit HaTikvah School have agreed to reunite and hold their classes in a new facility. Eran Barzilay, an Israeli who is familiar to readers from his reports on teaching in Kaifeng, is working with the merged schools on behalf of Shavei Israel.

It is our hope that Shavei Israel now will keep Judeo-Christian Timothy Lerner and his Hong Kong Christian missionary friends at a distance so that they won't be able to sway Jewish minds and hearts with their proselytizing soft-sell.

With this cautionary word, we hope that this reunification will mark a new willingness on the part of the Kaifeng Jews to eschew their factional ways and find ways to work together. The community is too small to be so divided. Perhaps if this first step is successful, they can proceed to collectively support a community center/museum, tourist ventures and other projects.

At the same time, with Shavei Israel now in position to be the primary liaison and funder of the school, SJI has the freedom to explore new directions both in Kaifeng and in China as a whole. It is a time of change and possible opportunity for our 28 year-old organization.

Although we still help fund Jewish Studies programs in China, many Chinese universities now have flourishing relationships with specific Jewish studies programs at universities around the world. The cities of China's eastern seaboard have recognized the tourist value of preserving aspects of their former Jewish communities and no longer need our input. SJI still funds research projects when scholars and others submit proposals and there are a raft of tourist and economic projects that have been proposed over the years to ameliorate the condition of the Kaifeng Jewish community. And, of course, we continue to update the resources of our website and to publish Points East.

Speaking of which, the current issue has a focus on the subject of conversion that unintentionally builds on last issue's look

(continued on page 3)

Points East

Anson Laytner, Publisher

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of Europe, and the State Department wasn't keen on the rescue effort.

All refugees would have to possess skills they could apply in the Philippines, and none could depend on any form of government welfare.

The Frieders raised tens of thousands of dollars to cover the costs; as refugees made their way to Manila, they found a hospitable environment. "It proved people of different backgrounds and nationalities can work together for the good of humanity," Sasser said. "They all believed in the same thing. They were all friends and they respected each other."

As they thrived, plans moved forward to rescue up to 30,000 Jews, all with Quezon's blessing. Unfortunately, the winds of war intervened, and the Philippines endured the brunt of the Japanese invasion. Manila was reduced to ruins, including the Frieders' cigar factory.

Quezon died in exile in 1944, before the end of the war and before he could bring more Jews to freedom. He did say before his death, "The people of the Philippines will have in the future every reason to be glad that when the time of need came, their country was willing to extend a hand of welcome."

Sasser said that when she was a girl in Cincinnati, her grandfather rarely talked about the Frieder brothers' heroics. "He was a jolly guy. My memories of him are of observing Passover in his condo. He played a lot of poker and smoked a lot of cigars. But what happened in the Philippines was not a common topic. These were regular businessmen who found themselves in a situation where they could be of help, and they did what they could. It turned out to be more than what most people could do."

Farquhar's parents chose to settle permanently in the Philippines, where her father was a physics professor at the University of the Philippines and Far Eastern University. Farquhar attended the American School and in 1961 moved to California to attend college. She stayed in the Bay Area and became a teacher of Spanish and German, first at San Francisco's George Washington High School and then at Lowell High School.

She has enjoyed a full and happy life in America, but she knows she owes it all

to that plucky band of machers who mapped out an epic rescue over a poker table.

"It shows the capacity for human beings to do what they know in their hearts is right," she said. "There's quite a lesson to be learned from that."

BOOK NOOK

Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich

by Steve Hochstadt
 Palgrave Macmillan 2012(+288 Pages \$28.00(+ISBN: 978-1-137-00671-4 reviewed by Marvin Tokayer

Reprinted from: http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/book/exodus-to-shanghai-stevehochstadt?utm_source=New+Reviews+Online+May+17th+2013&utm_campaign=JBC.New.Reviews.Email&utm_medium=email

I have been waiting for this book for decades. The heroic escape to Shanghai during the Holocaust is the least known chapter of the Holocaust experience. Steve Hochstadt, the author of *Exodus to Shanghai*, does not merely cite statistic but provides a face to this remarkable experience. It is a collective memoir of one hundred interviews, a classic and pacesetter of oral history, told with drama and pathos. The German Jewish community is suddenly uprooted, losing home, job, possessions, and citizenship. But where to go is the problem. Surprisingly, the Chinese consul in Vienna realized that Shanghai, not China, had no immigration procedures, and offered everyone a visa to Shanghai, which could be used to obtain an exit visa from the Nazis. The welcome to Shanghai included unbearable heat, disease, filth, lack of hygiene, no toilets, language barriers, insects, polluted water, noise pollution, and dead bodies everywhere. In addition there was a civil war, and an invasion by Japanese forces.

From this welcome, and starting with zero, a community of average Jews pulled together, pooled their resources, and survived. They learned to boil water and boil everything, had a communal kitchen,

staffed a refugee hospital, overcame obstacles, and produced a vibrant community. The magic of oral history, with excellent questions by the author, introduces the reader to the monthly opera and theater performances, daily newspapers of high quality, radio programs in German, English, and Yiddish, learning new trades, producing a Little Vienna of cafés, coffee shops and music, lending libraries, a refugee school of 600 students, comedy performances, refugee symphony orchestra, and even a magician. The author even accurately describes how children and teenagers survived. You will be surprised to read that teenagers were frequently the bread earners, and created a Shanghai Millionaire Monopoly game, and even wrote plays and read many books.

The author is to be commended for including a superb bibliography of primary and secondary sources, films, maps, charts, and photos. If there is one book to read about the Jewish experience in Shanghai, this is the one.

Updated Offer
Palgrave Macmillan is offering a 25% discount to members of SJI. Quote code CONF2013 when ordering at www.palgrave.com. This code is now operational.

Hiding in a Cave of Trunks: A Prominent Jewish Family's Century in Shanghai and Internment in a WWII POW camp

reviewed by Bev Friend
 Paperback: 276 pages; Publisher: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform; ISBN-10: 1479165387
 ISBN-13: 978-1479165384

Background
 Against an impressive historical background, China-born Ester Benjamin Shifren relates the saga of her family's century-long existence in Shanghai, the city often referred to as "The Paris of the East," and details the culture and tribulations of the colorful multi-ethnic population. In the 1840s a vessel brought the Benjamins from India to Shanghai, where they prospered for five generations. Some members of the family achieved high-level diplomatic positions. Owners of prize-winning horses, the family even

est accomplishments has been the construction of three model farms for agriculture training in China. Furthering these mutually beneficial partnerships and showing the Chinese that Israeli ingenuity can better their lives and vice versa has the potential to build the strongest of bridges between nations that place a high importance on collective knowledge and know-how.

While the State of Israel managed quite successfully without official ties to the People's Republic of China for over 40 years, today, Beijing's clout in the international arena is too important for Israel to overlook. As Israel struggles with its precarious political situation in a rapidly changing world, China is one of the few states that can provide the necessary support to ensure stability, if not an eventual solution, to the problems in the volatile Middle East. To benefit from such involvement, Israel needs to show the Chinese just how many similarities they share. If done successfully, the bridges that span between Beijing and Jerusalem will rise high and strong, invulnerable from the enemies of Israel that seek to prevent such paths.

Robert Pines is a BA/MA student in the School of International Service at American University in Washington, D. C. He may be reached at: robert.j.pines@gmail.com.

Poker pals in Philippines took gamble, saved 1,200 Jews

by Dan Pine
reprinted from Jweekly.com

Mary Farquhar's earliest memory is of flame.



Specifically, the flames of war in the last months of World War II, when Japanese

forces battled the Americans in a fight to reclaim Manila, Farquhar's city of refuge. She was a toddler at the time, the daughter of Austrian Jews given safe harbor in the Philippines, where she was born in 1943.

Hers was one of hundreds of European Jewish families — 1,200 Jews in all — taken in by the Pacific island nation between 1938 and 1941, saved from the Nazis by an unlikely alliance of Americans and Filipinos determined to do the right thing.

Among those benign conspirators were the five Frieder brothers, Jewish Americans who manufactured two-for-a-nickel cigars in the Philippines; the country's visionary Catholic president Manuel Quezon; U.S. High Commissioner Paul McNutt, who issued scores of visas; and Dwight D. Eisenhower, a few years before he became supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe.

It's a little-known story of hope, overshadowed by those of Oskar Schindler and the Jews of Shanghai. Yet it is no less dramatic or emblematic of courage.

A new one-hour documentary, "Rescue in the Philippines," seeks to set the record straight on this forgotten bit of Holocaust history. The film will air on PBS stations around the country beginning this week and will also premiere in San Francisco with a pair of free screenings on April 7 at the New People Cinema.

Farquhar appears in the film, retelling the story — now part of family lore — of how as a baby she wouldn't stop crying when her parents went into hiding during the battle for Manila in 1945.

"I remember as a child playing in the ruins after the war," said Farquhar from her San Francisco home. "My parents went from place to place, hiding out. My grandmother would cook on stones over an open fire. She made apple strudel out of native squash."

Most of her memories of the Philippines are happy. She lived there through her high school years, and though she has called California home for decades, she still loves the country that took in her family.

The documentary was the brainchild of

Barbara Sasser, a granddaughter of Alex Frieder, who along with his four brothers helped engineer the bold rescue. She says the idea took shape after a 2005 reunion in Cincinnati of surviving Jewish refugees and descendants of the Frieder brothers.

"That brought it to the forefront of my mind," Sasser recalled. "[My father and great-uncles] saved as many as Schindler, and the only reason people know about that was a movie. I thought this story deserved as much attention as that, and I said somebody should make a movie about this."

That somebody turned out to be her. Sasser served as a consultant on the film, which was made by 3 Roads Communications, a Maryland-based production company. Among other tasks, Sasser provided hours of home movies filmed by the Frieders in Manila during the tranquil prewar days in the 1930s.

As Sasser likes to say, it all started with cigars and a poker game.

Natives of Cincinnati, the Frieders went into the cigar business, opening a factory in Manila. Each brother took turns serving two-year stints on-site in Manila.



The Frieder brothers (from left): Morris, Herbert, Phillip, Henry & Alex

All became devoted to the nation, which at the time was emerging from centuries of colonial rule.

Among their closest friends and fellow poker players were Eisenhower, then an Army colonel, and Quezon, the country's charismatic president.

Though of different faiths and cultural backgrounds, the team worked together to extricate Jews from Germany and Austria, issue visas and bring them to Manila. It wasn't easy. The noose had already started to tighten around the Jews

at Rabbi Amsallem's proposal to treat members of Zera Yisrael more leniently than others who wish to join the Jewish people. As the articles show, becoming a Jew remains a challenge in Israel and a hot topic for Jewish people around the world.

Anson Laytner

TO THE EDITOR

Harbin Old Jewish Synagogue to be Reconstructed

Dear Friends—especially former residents of Harbin and their descendants,

It gives me a great pleasure in informing you of the Harbin Municipal Government decision to reconstruct and renovate the Harbin Main (Old) Synagogue and the Jewish Secondary School next to it, as well as two other buildings and a large square that together form a block in the heart of historical Harbin.

The Harbin Municipal Government has invested more than 80 million Yuan RMB for the project. About 40 million Yuan RMB were already spent on relocating residents from 4 nearby apartment buildings, and leveling the structures to give way for the square that is situated at the center of the block.

The other 40 million Yuan RMB are being used for the reconstruction and renovation works.

In February 2013, the Harbin City Government decided to return the Harbin Main (Old) Jewish Synagogue to its original century old appearance both exterior and interior.

Unfortunately, we were unable to find the original construction and design blueprints of the synagogue. Moreover, I was able to locate just few photographs, mainly of the exterior of the building, and several of the interior.

As works on the project have already started and the architects are working on the design, we are in urgent need of any information, including architectural drawings, pictures of the interior (of the different halls and communal rooms), diaries, letters, and or other data you may have in your hands (family albums, memorabilia, or any other sources) that

may shade light on the interior look of the synagogue.

I urge all of you to spare no effort in trying to find anything that may be of help to us return the Harbin Jewish heritage to its glorious days.

Please scan your materials and send all information to me URGENTLY and AS SOON AS POSSIBLE!

Please pass this information to all your family members, friends and anyone you know who had roots in Harbin.

With much gratitude,

Professor Dan Ben-Canaan
Member and Advisor,
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E-mail: bencanaan@gmail.com or canaan@inter.net.il
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Chinese and Jewish Medicine

To the Editor,

I am a longtime practitioner of Traditional Jewish and Chinese medicine,(you can read about the work and research that I do on my website or blogs, addresses below). I have for many years searched for parallels in the healing traditions of China and Judaism. For the most part my efforts have been unsuccessful. This in spite of the fact that Jews were always among the merchants traveling the Silk Road between Eurasia and the East. It seemed so logical that Jews, always the adapters and innovators, would learn about and introduce the rich tradition of acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine to Europe and the Middle East. Yet the first and only mention that I have been able to find of acupuncture, until recent times, in Jewish literature, is in the book, *Ma'ase Tuvia*, written in the beginning of the 18th century, by Tuvia Hacohen, a Polish Jew, who attended medical school in Padua, Italy, and who became the chief physician of the Ottoman Empire. I would note, by the way, that interestingly, Moses Maimonides' *Glossary of Drug Names*, published by The Rambam Research In-

stitute in Haifa, Israel, does mentions several Chinese herbs, indicating that some interaction must have taken place between China and the Middle East. Also In China itself, despite the existence of vibrant Jewish communities in Kaifeng, Harbin and later Shanghai, among others, to the best of my knowledge, there is no mention of the Jewish medicinal tradition in any historical works addressing these communities.

From the extent of your research have you come across any information that sheds new light on this historical phenomenon?

Respectfully,
Yehuda Frischman
rebyidel@gmail.com
Los Angeles, CA

Grant Announced

Jiangsu Provincial Department of Education has just announced that the Glazer Institute for Jewish culture and Israel Studies headed by Prof. Xu Xin has been chosen as one of nine key centers for International studies of Jiangsu Province among over 20 universities and colleges. It will receive a grant of 100,000 Yuan annually from the Department for next four years. The function of such a center is similar to that of a think tank, an advisory committee for policy decisions in Jiangsu Province.

[Jiangsu, one of the most developed areas in China, has actively cooperated economically with Israel in last 10 years.]

Torah to Shanghai

An official delegation of Chinese mayors from Chinese Friendship Association visited Israel in recent days. They received a Torah scroll. The Torah will be transferred to the synagogue in the Jewish Museum in Shanghai.



The Aliyah Roadblock in Israel

(continued from page 1)

sell his/her home, leave a job, continue to live out of boxes for months on end?

...Allow me to present but one example of the cruelty of the system: Lee (not his real name) was brought to Israel by an organization determined to help the community of Kaifeng in China (this city has a long history of Jews living there but assimilation has nearly ended even the memory of the Jewish community).

Lee studied at a religious high school in Israel for four years. He prepared for conversion during this period. But he was not converted in the end. None of the students from Kaifeng were converted. Our Rabbinate does not, in the overwhelming majority of cases, convert people of color.

Lee returned to China where he kept Kosher (vegetarian), and continued his involvement with the Jewish life available to him. Lee was prepared for the Israeli academic system but not for the Chinese system. So university in China was not in the cards.

Lee had the good fortune to receive an invitation to BCI (the Brandeis Collegiate Institute of the American Jewish University) this past summer. Lee is now twenty years old. Here he participated in an intensive Jewish educational summer program for young adults. Lee also completed his conversion. He appeared before a panel of three Masorti/Conservative rabbis, followed by Hatafat Dam and Mikveh.

Lee's US visa expired yesterday. He is seeking a brief extension. Lee observes Kashrut, Shabbat, attends shul. He applied to make Aliyah following his acceptance into the Jewish people. His friends and schoolmates are in Israel. He leads a Jewish life. He hopes to serve in the IDF as his classmates have done. He seeks to fulfill the Mitzvah of Yeshuv HaAretz.

But time is running out for Lee. He may soon be forced to return to China. His file, with the recommendation of the Jewish Agency that he be granted a visa to make Aliyah, is sitting on a pile of files in the Interior Ministry. Each week we

are told that maybe there will be an answer next week. But no answer seems imminent. A Jew wishing to fulfill the Mitzvah of Aliyah. The Jewish State is the obstacle. Just absurd.

P.S. I was notified just one hour ago that, at least for now, Lee's request to make Aliyah has been refused.

2. Eliminating race as an issue in Aliyah

Feb 20, 2013

Jewish tradition demands that we be very careful when making accusations. Like pillow feathers scattered in the wind that may not be put back inside in pillow – so too is an accusation made in public against others...So it is with a great deal of trepidation, and an awareness of the possible burden I take on myself, that I write this blog.

I have alleged racism within the Interior Ministry in the past. See the blog I wrote about the deserving young man from Kaifeng, China, who is being denied Aliyah for no other reason than race...Again I wish to emphasize that the problem is not within the Jewish Agency but within Israel's Interior Ministry.

But the time has come to stop ignoring the elephant in the room. It is time to call for those who make decisions as to which converts to Judaism may make Aliyah based on issues other than the facts, and the demands of the law, to either change their ways or be fired. As one who recognizes that firing is not really an option in the bureaucracy of the government I would accept that those involved be pushed upstairs, aside, out, or to some nihilarian division.

For those who would charge that I am whining about the State not accepting non-Orthodox converts – this would be wrong. Our converts are accepted by law. By and large they do not encounter major problems in the Aliyah process if they indeed have all documents required by law.

At any given time there may be dozens of Jews by Choice waiting for approval. In most of these cases they will wait forever barring intervention of their behalf by the wonderful lawyers of IRAC who do holy work, and the caring people of the Masorti and Reform movements in

Israel...

These cases are not rare. Indeed they are all too common. It brings me no pleasure to write that they also occur among Orthodox converts.

Lest one ask "What about the Ethiopians or other minorities?" it should be said that these people are brought to Israel under separate agreements that go way above the regular staff in the Interior Ministry.

Judaism is by definition not racist. This is why people of any race may convert to Judaism. But there are Jewish racists. And there are bureaucrats determined to keep the gates closed to ninety nine deserving Olim if it means keeping out one who is not deserving...

I fear that writing such words as I have may give ammunition to the enemies of Israel. We are subjected to so much criticism that is unjust. But when officials within our own government act with malice, then as the prophet Isaiah said, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch."

3. Chopsticks, Pesach and Aliyah

Apr 17, 2013

Some of you may know that I devote much time to helping Jews by Choice make Aliyah, under the Law of Return, when they have been refused by Israel's Interior Ministry for unfair reasons, in violation of Israeli law. Refusal is usually not related to the denominational affiliation of the Ger (convert). It too often is connected to racial issues.

In order to be an honest advocate some-



communities that welcomed us for services and meals, including Sephardic, Reform, and traditional. All of us were invited to mark the close of Shabbat with havdalah at a nearby synagogue.

On Sunday, we joined for a full day of activities, beginning at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, and culminating in a ceremony marking Holocaust Remembrance Day as well as the 70th anniversary of the Hongkou Ghetto. Our day began with a tour through the museum and ghetto, located within walking distance of one another in the historic Tilanqiao Historic Area. During the Holocaust, about 14,000 Jewish refugees fled Europe to reside in this area, as they waited to resume life as usual after the end of the war. Prominent among the buildings in this area is the recently restored Ohel Moshe Synagogue, the main center of religious life during World War II. As nightfall came, the Israeli Consulate of Shanghai held a Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony at the historic Ohel Rachel Synagogue. The activities of the day were filled with emotion, as we looked back in recent history, recalled vivid memories of the Holocaust, and expressed profound gratitude to the Chinese people for their role in saving Jewish lives.

At the end of the weekend, I flew back to Nanyang to return to work and daily life, not to mention life as a Jew without a minyan. I had gone to Limmud for a feeling of connection, and certainly got what I was looking for: connections to people, to places, to the past and to the future.

For more information about Limmud, visit www.limmudchina.org and www.limmudinternational.org.

Building Israel's Bridges to China on Common Ground

by Robert J. Pines
excerpted from his blog in the *Times of Israel*, 12/25/2012

...While the differences between China and Israel are easy to spot, it is their numerous similarities that can lay the groundwork for a long-term mutually beneficial relationship. Despite all that separates them, China, a rising global superpower with a population of over one billion, and Israel, a regional Middle

Eastern power with a population of just 7.5 million, share parallel historical narratives, similar approaches to society-building, and a strong emphasis on cultural identity. While not readily apparent, this common ground between China and Israel could serve as a strong base on which to build bridges between Asia's furthest neighbors, thereby bringing about a truly unique friendship.

Rising from the tragedy of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the creation of the People's Republic of China parallels that of the State of Israel, which came into being despite the devastation caused by the Holocaust during the Second World War. Although fought under very different circumstances, the atrocities committed against the Chinese by imperial Japan during their war of expansion have been likened to an "Asian Holocaust," similar to what happened under German rule in Europe. In both cases, the Japanese and the Germans utilized mass killings, human experimentation, and forced labor to create unimaginable suffering. In both cases, however, the victims prevailed. In fact, both China and Israel came into being after bloody civil wars that saw the dominance of the Communists over the Nationalists in mainland China and the Jewish Zionists over the Arabs in mandatory Palestine. Both represent underdog victories against strong, well-prepared opponents.

Following Israel's independence in 1948 and China's independence in 1949, each nation used national pride as a tool for building a strong, cohesive society. Although very different in terms of style, the charismatic leadership of Prime Minister David Ben Gurion and Chairman Mao Zedong unified their respective nations around a common cause...In order to contribute to the success of their nascent states, average citizens lived and worked on kibbutzim in Israel and people's communes in China. In addition, the development of the Israel Defense Forces and the People's Liberation Army served as strong sources of national pride that helped solidify Israel's Jewish/Zionist identity and China's revolutionary/communist identity. This legacy of state building has resulted in proud societies that have gradually shifted away from socialism and communism and towards booming, successful free-market systems. Culture also links the values of China and Israel, as both nations place

longstanding importance on rituals, collective memories, and the restoration of their respective tongues: Simplified Chinese and Modern Hebrew. The heritage of both the Chinese and the Jews is strongly fixed in the past, with memories of China's dynastic periods and Israel's ancient kingdoms alive in present-day rituals. For example, dragon dances on the Chinese New Year and the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah have been performed for thousands of years, transcending time and spanning the generations. In addition, efforts to simplify the Chinese language and restore the Hebrew language have breathed new life into the study of cultural texts written by cherished historical philosophers, like Confucius and Maimonides.

Although there is plenty of common ground between the Chinese and the Israelis, few organizations utilize this to develop the kind of cross-cultural understanding that would help build bridges between Beijing and Jerusalem. In the years immediately preceding the official establishment of diplomatic relations, a Center of Israel Studies was set up in Shanghai in 1989 to promote collaboration and dialogue between the peoples of China and Israel. In addition, the PRC surprised Israeli officials by requesting permission to send Chinese students to learn Hebrew in the early 1990s. This was followed by [the opening of] a...mission of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Beijing and a similar mission of Luxingshe, the China National Travel Service, set up in Tel Aviv. Since both sides established official diplomatic relations, however, commercial and military ties have taken all priority over cultural understanding. While this has no doubt been mutually beneficial, it has not fostered the kind of bridges that link Israel with the United States of America or Canada, for example.

Mitigating the influence of China's 20-plus Arab allies is a challenge Israel must be willing to take on in the fight for Chinese support. Besides the kinds of necessary non-profit and academic institutions that contribute to greater cross-cultural understanding, Israel has a great resource in its Center for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV). Through programs run by MASHAV, thousands of Chinese trainees have attended courses in China and Israel to learn about better development practices. One of its great-

whelmed by the large Hindu-Muslim society they lived in. Was it that the cultural atmosphere in China, though hospitable and tolerant to foreigners, was not conducive to practicing Judaism? Indeed, we know of the early symptoms of dilution: in the Confucian-style synagogue, incense was burned to honor biblical heroes, sacrifices in the Chinese style (but of kosher food) were offered on some Jewish holidays, and boys studied Confucian texts instead of the Torah.

The existence of the Jews in China was unknown to the Western world until 1605, when Jesuit Matteo Ricci met a Kaifeng Jew in Beijing who arrived there to take Confucian examinations for a prestigious government post. As described by Ricci, that young man was dressed and looked Chinese but considered himself Jewish, a believer in One God. Perhaps by that time, an overwhelming number of young ambitious Jewish men – instead of dedicating their lives to Torah - preferred to study Confucius, a requirement for any promising government position. By the early 1600s, the Kaifeng rabbi was already struggling with the lack of young men knowledgeable in Jewish law because, as Ricci recorded, the rabbi offered him a job as his successor: if the Jesuit joined the Jewish faith and stopped eating pork, of course.

“Yes,” says Esther, while we smile at a Rabbi-and-a-Jesuit story, “We lost our ancestral language, traditions, even blood line. But we kept our memories and pride in being Jewish. We told stories. We survived.” There are probably a few hundred people in Kaifeng now who consider themselves Jewish either through a family line or marriage. A growing number of young people discover their Jewish roots and make *aliyah* to Israel; Hebrew classes are highly popular in Kaifeng, and Esther tells us of frequent Shabbat gatherings with a communal service, song singing, and a potluck kosher (Halal) meal. At the conclusion of Shabbat, they sing *Hatikva* in Hebrew. Often – by memory. “I don’t like the word *assimilation*,” Esther says. “Are you a Jew only if you go to the synagogue and read Torah there? Do you think there is only one *Dao* of being Jewish?”

What we learned from the Jews of China

For Esther and Jin and their families, the *Dao* to being a Jew is built on family

memories, understanding of Judaism as a precious treasure and a strong sense of identity handed from generation to generation. And they are prepared to uphold this ancestral heirloom against any powerful force, whether cultural, political or economic. The Jews of China helped us to see that we, Western Jews, are not just one among many minority cultures in the large societies where we live: we are an integral part of a unique, millennia old tradition with its own historic and geographic trajectory.

The author expresses her deepest gratitude to Mr. Raj Ahmed, the owner and the President of the Chicago-based Exotic Journeys, Inc. and his Beijing-based partner Mr. Mike Jing of Express Tours. Without their organizational talent, none of our fascinating Kaifeng encounters would be possible.

Making Connections at Limmud

by Rabbi Loraine C. Heller

It’s only a matter of time, I thought, until I get connected to other Jews living in China. I knew that Jews had come to China at various points in history, and that there were Jews living there today. But I also knew that there was no Jewish community in Nanyang, located in Henan Province, where I had taken a job teaching English at a university beginning in September of 2012. Sometimes I go abroad in search of Jewish life, but this time, I would need to let Jewish life find me.

Quite by chance, Jewish life did find me, about six months after I arrived in Nanyang. Through some online networking, I learned that Limmud would be held in early April, over the long weekend when the Chinese observe tomb sweeping day. Sponsored by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Philanthropic Network, Limmud is designed to attract Jews from across the spectrum of denominations, cultures, and ages, and takes place in the many locations where Jews live throughout the world. This Limmud would bring together participants from East Asia, including Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Japan, Mumbai, Singapore, and the host city, Shanghai. Appropriately, we would gather in a city with Jewish history, as well as a signifi-

cant present-day Jewish population and a number of active communal organizations. And so off to Limmud I went.

After arriving in Shanghai by air, I immediately headed for the hotel in Qibao where the conference would be held. Once inside the hotel, members of the volunteer team of Limmud checked me in and handed me a souvenir tote bag containing the customary giveaways and information that would guide participants through the next four days. Much to my surprise, the conference handbook was quite substantial, about a half-inch thick. Obviously, the weekend would be filled with activities. After coming from Nanyang, a city of over ten million people where I am probably the only Jew, I started to feel an alternative form of culture shock; rather than facing the challenges of living in a different culture, I began to experience the familiarity that comes from connecting with one’s own culture. And living in China, a country where statistics are astronomical, it appeared from the handbook alone that Limmud was also posting some pretty impressive numbers.

Getting a closer look, the conference handbook listed about 60 sessions along with bios of the presenters for the approximately 150 people who came to Limmud. The eclectic array of sessions focused on themes such as Jewish texts, law, politics, Kabbalah, music, business, history, spirituality, food, the environment, and health. In addition, many sessions were offered for children ages four to seven, eight to eleven, teens, and families. The headline on the handbook read, “Find your path to Limmud,” and given the number and variety of activities, including lectures, workshops, discussion groups, games, and entertainment, there was definitely something for everyone.

Just after lunch on Friday, the sessions of Limmud came to an end, and a ceremony was held thanking the many volunteers, presenters, and participants in this momentous event. Last year, a smaller-scale version of Limmud was held, and its overwhelming success inspired this undertaking, the first full Limmud in East Asia.

Following the closing ceremony, we were taken by bus to continue our weekend at a hotel in Shanghai. For Shabbat, we were offered a choice of local religious

times travel to local Jewish communities becomes necessary...

I was drawn to look into what was happening on the ground when the young man [pictured] was refused Aliyah. Shin (or Jaixin), about whom I have written previously, was brought to study at an Orthodox boarding school in Israel from 9th-12 grade. He was refused the opportunity to appear before a Beit Din of the Chief Rabbinate by Israel’s Interior Ministry. He returned to China where he is a part of weekly Shabbat davening and a Jewish “school” that has been established in the city. Last summer he attended the Brandeis Collegiate Institute in LA – for an intensive experience of Jewish learning and culture. It was there that Shin was finally able to complete his conversion. Shin then applied for Aliyah with the full backing of the Jewish agency. Shin wishes to serve in the IDF as his high school classmates have done. The Interior Ministry has refused his request and all of my appeals on his behalf have fallen on deaf ears. I assert that there can be no good explanation of his refusal other than racism.

I felt I needed to see if the rumors of a renewed life of the Jewish world in Kaifeng were true. It is a far less developed and more isolated city than, say, Beijing or Shanghai, where there is a Chabad presence. But let there be no question that something special is happening there.

The families in Kaifeng who descend from the Jews have family records and photos. Each Friday night there is a traditional Friday night davening at Beit HaTikvah (one of the local Jewish schools) followed by a vegetarian (Kosher food is not available) Shabbat dinner. The Mezuzah is prominently attached to the door and the sign makes no secret of what the place is. The apartment which houses Beit HaTikvah is a gathering place and there are regular classes offered on Judaism – much by Skype.

I traveled to Kaifeng just last month. I had brought quite a bit of KP food with me for the Seder. But to keep my suitcase light it was mostly items like mashed potato mix, Pesach roll mix, Kaneidalach mix, and powdered soup. None of this food was used as the idea of making food from powder and water did not seem to speak to the locals.

Our Seder food was mostly fruits and vegetables. What may have needed to be Kasherred was dealt with and we bought new chopsticks. Haroset with Lychee nuts – why not? Each person had a glass for wine but all food was eaten off of common plates in the table center. We had prepared for the possibility of needing to make raisin juice and our own Matzot. Wine and Matzot arrived some two hours before Seder from Chabad in Shanghai.

The photo-copied Haggadah was a mix of Chinese and Hebrew. We took turns reading. We had fewer children than I had hoped for as school did not let out until after eight in the evening. A parent may not have a child excused from class for holidays or personal events.

Candles were lit with the traditional blessings recited in Hebrew. Rituals such as hand washing were familiar. I had thought to send Pesach songs in advance using You Tube. It had slipped my mind that You Tube is blocked in China. So too Facebook. It turned out that some of the Pesach songs were known by some of the scores who joined us for Seder.

My friend Shin sat next to me to serve as translator. Shin is equally comfortable in both Hebrew and English.

And yes, our Seder included a Kos Miriam along with the Cup of Eliyahu.

While the last thing we ate was the Afikoman (followed by Birkat HaMazon) – there was plenty of Israeli chocolate on the tables for dessert. The emotional conclusion to our Seder was the singing of Hatikvah both in Mandarin and in Hebrew.

Now many readers will dismiss the Seder participants as being a bunch of non-Jews. But let us recall how many “non-Jews” preserved some sort of identity in the various former communist countries under difficult circumstances. Today we are reviving some of those communities.

It must be noted that many prominent rabbis over the years held “Zera Yisrael” - those of Jewish descent – although not technically Jewish, in a special place. Israel’s first Sefardic Chief Rabbi, Ben-Zion Uziel did not require potential converts to live an Orthodox lifestyle as long as they committed to raising the children as Jews. He stated, “From all this we have learned that the condition of fulfilling the

mitzvoth does not prevent a conversion even to begin with...we learn that it is permissible and a mitzvah to accept converts even though we know that they will not fulfill all the mitzvot.” He goes so far as to write that failure to seek out those of Zera Yisrael will “result in the rabbis being called in front of the heavenly court to explain why they, as shepherds, did not seek to bring in our lost flock.”

I found out, on my last day in China (second half of Hag was spent in Seoul, Korea) that there would be the first Asian *Limud* in Shanghai just after Pesach...An “angel” allowed me to fund the travel of both Shin and his uncle to Limud.

The Cultural Revolution came close to spelling the end for Jewish life in Kaifeng. Shin’s grandfather was evicted from his home and sent to a training camp - but life is slowly returning.

Now, if Shin would only have his Aliyah approved by the Interior Ministry.

Rabbi Andrew Sacks is the Director of the Masorti [Conservative] Movement’s Rabbinical Assembly in Israel (the organization of Masorti/Conservative rabbis) and the Masorti Movement’s Bureau of Religious Affairs. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of Masorti organizations.

7 Chinese Jews Rejoin the Jewish People

(continued from page 1)

colors,” reports Rabbi Weinberg.

Accompanying the Chinese contingent was *Shavei Israel* Chairman Michael Freund who also attended the Beit Din to provide them with moral support and encouragement, as well as to speak on their behalf before the Rabbinical Court in support of their quest to undergo conversion.

Their next and final steps will be *brit mila* (circumcision) and *mikve* (immersion in a ritual bath)...

During their time in Efrat, the Chinese men were “adopted” by local families and integrated well into the fabric of Israeli life. The benefit goes both ways. On Sunday night, Rabbi Weinberg threw

a Hanukah candle lighting party and the men from Kaifeng cooked up some fabulous Chinese food.

Tony – who has taken on the Hebrew first name “Hoshea” – and his friends are getting ready to leave the *yeshiva* now. Some will go to the army, others to learn more Heberw in *ulpan*. And two want to open their own Chinese restaurant in Israel.

2. Chinese Jews in Israel take the final plunge

by Michael Freund

excerpted from the Shavei Israel website: http://www.shavei.org/communities/kaifeng_jews/articles-kaifeng_jews 26/02/2013

Last week, the small and unassuming *mikve* (ritual bath) in Hod HaSharon witnessed the unfolding of a remarkable scene in the annals of Jewish history.



The 7 Kaifeng Jewish men with Michael Freund & Rabbi Menachem Weinberg

One by one, six young Chinese men, all descendants of the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, immersed themselves in the warm and purifying waters before a three-man rabbinical court, thereby completing their long journey home to the Jewish people.

It marked the first time that a group of Chinese-Jewish men had undergone a formal return to Judaism in the Jewish state.

And for Yaakov Wang, as well as the others, it was the fulfillment of a life-long dream, one that had been passed down to them by their ancestors throughout the generations.

As a young man in China, Wang first learned of his family's Jewish heritage

from his grandfather. And while he knew little about the details of Jewish practice, he instilled within Wang a strong sense of Jewish pride...

It was this stirring which prompted Wang and six other Jewish descendants from Kaifeng to make *aliyah* in October 2009. They were brought to Israel by *Shavei Israel*.

Previously, we had brought a group of four young women from Kaifeng to Israel in 2006, all of whom successfully completed the conversion process within 12 months after their arrival.

But in recent years, Israel's bureaucracy grew more taxing, necessitating that we wage a prolonged battle of more than three years on behalf of Wang and the others.

I will spare you the details, but suffice it to say that on more than one occasion, the young men from Kaifeng were pushed to the breaking point, wondering whether the Jewish people truly wanted them back.

Fortunately, they did not give up, and that persistence was rewarded at the Hod HaSharon *mikve* last week, where Wang and the other five young Chinese Jews completed their conversion (the seventh member of the group, Hoshea Tony Liang, did so previously).

It should not be this way. It should not be so difficult and draining for descendants of the Jewish people to return to their roots.

Wang and the other young men are serious about their Judaism. They spent two years studying in yeshiva, pray three times a day, observe the Sabbath and the dictates of *halacha*.

Wang now wants to study to become a rabbi – the first Chinese rabbi in two centuries! – to help other Kaifeng Jewish descendants to learn more about their heritage.

“They deserve a chance to become more knowledgeable Jews,” Wang said, adding, “That is what our ancestors would have wanted.”

Another member of the group plans to learn how to be a *shochet* (ritual

slaughterer) and open an authentic kosher Chinese restaurant in Israel, while a third, who trained as a dentist in China, hopes to qualify to work in his profession here in the Jewish state.

After nearly disappearing more than a century ago, China's Jewish descendants are reaching out to us, looking to re-embrace their Jewishness. A way must now be found to enable them to do so.

This article first appeared in The Jerusalem Post.

The Dao of Being Jewish: Lessons from China

by Irene Shaland

“Judaism is ... a precious stone which needs to be discovered, mined, and delicately carved into an intricate masterpiece” - Aaron Nankin

For the Chinese, the “Dao” or “Tao,” is a fundamental concept of cultural philosophy, and signifies the *way* or the *path* to life-long self-discovery. During our recent trip to China, our way led us to Henan province in the central part of the country. My husband and I came in search of a Jewish story, and the story we found was much more than we could have anticipated. It made us feel overwhelmingly blessed and nourished by the unique perception and value of Judaism we discovered in this Chinese culture, a culture much different than ours.

Kaifeng, Henan province

By Chinese standards, Kaifeng is a small town of 600,000 people in a 100 million-people province of Henan, one of the poorest in the country. There ancient capitals of the great civilization rose and fell over many centuries, nourished and ruined by the moody Yellow River. Don't look for Beijing-style skyscrapers in Kaifeng; deep foundations for these buildings would destroy ancient cities below. Not far from Kaifeng, you can find China's oldest Buddhist temple, White Horse Temple, and one of the world's most precious collections of Buddhist cave carvings, Longmen caves. It was in Henan, not far from Kaifeng, that the philosophy of peace – Buddhism, and the “Dao” of martial arts - Kung Fu, forged an unlikely partnership and made the Shaolin Temple the world-famous

bors that the Jews became “Tiaojinjiao” – the religion that removes the sinew. All these names were given just to describe the people with different customs and to distinguish between them – never with animosity or violent hostility. The Chinese word for Jew, “Youtai,” was not used in China until the Jesuits introduced it in the 17th century. “But we,” says Esther, “always called ourselves “the Children of Israel” and since we were comfortable and prosperous in Kaifeng, we built our synagogue here.”

The Confucian-looking synagogue

It is not known how the first Kaifeng Synagogue built in the 12th-century looked. What we know is based on much later descriptions and drawings made by the Jesuits in the 17th century. For anyone who visited the Forbidden City in Beijing and at least a temple or two elsewhere in China, the synagogue rendering reminds of the country's typical residential or religious compounds. The synagogue was built according to the Confucian principles of architecture, explains Esther, and that legitimized both Jews and their faith for the country that had never known organized religion. Just like many buildings in China, stone lions flanked the entrance to the synagogue complex consisting of enclosed courtyards and halls. The pathway to the Front Hall was also guarded by two large marble lions on pedestals. A giant iron incense tripod, like in Taoist or Buddhist temples, stood between the lions. The entire compound is described as being four hundred feet in depth. Unlike Chinese temples that face south, the synagogue gate looked eastward while the worshippers faced westward toward Jerusalem. The synagogue was designed to offer full-service life style: kitchen, ritual bath *mikva*, study halls, meeting rooms, lecture halls...There were the Hall of the Founder of the Religion - Abraham, Hall of the Patriarchs, Ancestral Hall... The Main Hall was forty by sixty feet in size and like any other Chinese main hall, it was raised on a platform and surrounded by a balustrade. In the middle was a large table for an incense burner and candlesticks with a Chair of Moses behind the table. The Torah raised up high was read from that place. The name for Torah in Chinese, says Esther, is “Daojing” with Dao meaning “the Way” and the “jing” – the scriptures: The Scriptures of the Way.

The stories told by stones

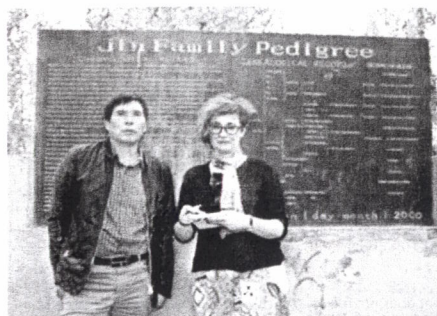
Kaifeng Jews were not the first ones to arrive in China. Historians believe that Jews already lived there during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Jews and their synagogue are mentioned by name in a poem written during the Tang Dynasty (618-906). In Luoyang museum (also of Henan province), we noticed a half-dozen figurines made of famous Tang period tricolor ceramic: they were peddlers, bakers, and merchants with clear Semitic features. They could be Arab traders, of course, arriving via the Silk Road. But they could be Jews, also. To us, they seem quite Jewish in appearance. “Yes,” says Esther, “there were other Jewish settlements in ancient China.” But, “we,” she states with pride, “we were the largest in China and the one that lasted the longest and the only one which left substantial records of its own.” These records are the three large stone stelae erected to commemorate the rebuilding of the synagogue in 1489, 1512 and 1679. The fourth stela dated 1663 was lost but the remaining ones are kept in a small, controlled-environment, no-photography-allowed room in Kaifeng Municipal Museum and could be visited by appointment with a private guide. Esther takes us there and after a long steep climb up the stairs, we are facing three large limestone stelae. Centuries old and badly damaged by rain, wind and floods, they are telling their stories through the protective glass. These stories are of Jews first entering China and the Imperial welcome, of their long history in Kaifeng and the interpretations of Jewish beliefs and practices. The stories are written in Chinese, says Esther, and when she reads us excerpts from a hand-out, it is clear that the authors tried really hard to stress the similarities of their faith and practices to the Chinese Confucians. The founder of the Jewish religion, Abraham, is called there a descendent of Pangu, a mythological Chinese character who created the universe. It is said that Abraham established the Jewish religion in the “146th year of Zhou dynasty” (10th century BC) and then this religion was given to Moses, a “Patriarch of the True Religion, in the 613th year of Zhou” (5th century BC). “Jewish way of worshiping God,” continues the text of the 1489 stela, “fully manifested the mysteries of the Ancestral Dao...Dao has no shape or form but above all else.” The same stela recounts that the Jews arrived in China during the Song Dynasty (10th-13th centuries) from India (or the Middle East in general); and the Emperor, who most probably was interested in cotton sold by the Jews, told

them to preserve their ancestral customs and to settle in Bianliang (Kaifeng). The names of the first settlers' 70 clans are listed in Chinese, including the Rabbi LeiWei (probably a Levite). The remaining two stelae mention other Jewish communities in China, emphasize the “boundless loyalty” of Jewish soldiers to their new home country, and commemorate the rebuilding of the synagogue.

By the time the last stela was created in 1679, the Silk Road was only a memory and Kaifeng was no longer a capital: its economic importance of an international trade center ended and prosperity deeply declined. So did the wealth of the small Jewish community. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Kaifeng Jewish community all but disappeared. Destroyed and rebuilt many times, the Kaifeng synagogue never recovered from the 1840s flood, and by the 1850s, it was a ruin. By then, no Jew in Kaifeng could read Hebrew, and there was no Rabbi. It is known that at that time, a Torah scroll was displayed in the Kaifeng market together with a sign offering a reward to any traveler who could interpret its text for local Jews. Ancient scrolls from the synagogue were sold to Westerners and now could be seen in various museums around the world: from the British Museum and Cambridge University in the UK, to Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. The synagogue ruins were cleared and the land was sold. All that is left of it are the remains of the *mikva* inside the hospital built on its site and the story-telling stone stelae in the museum.

Why did the Kaifeng Jewish community disappear?

There is no single answer. Were the Chinese Jews dispersed by natural and man-made disasters, recurrent floods and wars, or rebellions and economic decline? If we look at the history of European Jewry over the centuries of persecutions and pogroms, these reasons alone could not fully explain the disappearance of the community. Was it then a historic circumstance of a community being small in numbers, isolated geographically, and overpowered by strong Chinese culture? If we look at India, there the Jews, the tiniest of India's communities, managed to live in prosperity and freedom for 2500 years while preserving their religious and cultural identity without being over-



center of Kung Fu. Kaifeng served seven dynasties as a capital and became one of the world's biggest cities during the Northern Song (10th to 13th century). Kaifeng is also the capital for Jewish history pilgrims. Many Jewish tours center on Shanghai as a safe haven during the Holocaust. In Shanghai, you learn about the *Jews in China*. To learn about the *Jews of China* you find no guidebook to provide you with a ready-made itinerary. No site survived to showcase that fascinating aspect of Chinese history, and modern China does not recognize its Jews as one of the country's minorities. You have to come to Kaifeng to find and meet them.

Mr. Jin's family tomb

Mr. Jin is a middle-aged man with a shy, kind smile. He gets into our car on one of Kaifeng's busy streets and in rapid Chinese, shouts to our driver, "This is the way." And away we go. The smoke-laden city disappears and a narrow bumpy road brings us into what seems to be a different world altogether. It is not just countryside, but some silent place lost in time, dipped in a strange glow; yellow dust on the road, yellow clay on small houses, and yellow grass surrounding them. Dogs and goats slowly cross the street and join the children playing in the middle of it and without moving an inch from an approaching car, all are enveloped in yellow light and golden-colored dust. "This is where," Mr. Jin says through the interpreter, "the Jews of Kaifeng, who settled in this city during the Song Dynasty (10th to 13th century), buried their dead for centuries." We arrived at the oldest Jewish cemetery in China, Guang Zhong Jin's family burial place!

Family Pedigree," reads the title at the top. This marble wall is a memorial book which presents – engraved in English on one side and in Chinese on another – the 900-year story of Mr. Jin's family within the context of Chinese history. "Chronological" (narrative) and "Genealogical" (family tree) records, written there large and flamboyant, and in stone.

This is what we learned from Mr. Jin and his marble book. Sometime in the beginning of the 12th-century, Mr. Jin says, his first forebear, a Jewish trader on the Silk Road, entered China via India, and settled in what was then called Dongging or Bianliang (Kaifeng). He was not a pioneer by any means: there already was an established small but thriving Jewish community in Kaifeng. A rich person, that first patriarch bought a family plot south of the city walls, in a place called Caizhuang. The family's original name is lost in time. But this was how Jin's ancestors along with other Chinese Jews got their current names: the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), who liberated China from the Mongols and hated all foreigners, forced Jews to assume Chinese surnames; the family's name became Jin. It is an occupational name, explained Mr. Jin, an equivalent of Goldsmith. Also, at that point, Jewish men started to intermarry with their Chinese neighbors and paternity began to determine the Jewish origin. We continue to follow Mr. Jin family's illustrious story and read about an "Honorable Minister of Salaries" – in the

1300s; high-level army officer, a "Vanguard Commander" – in the 1400s; and a Confucian scholar in the 1600s. One ancestor financed rebuilding of the Kaifeng Synagogue when it was ruined by a flood, another paid for the repair of its ancient Hebrew scrolls. The Nationalist era (1912-1949) and the Revolution saw the family's fortune reversed: there were opium addiction and a suicide, an inheritance was squandered and land lost or taken by the government. The Jews of China, officials and merchants; generals and scholars; shop owners and farm laborers; some rising to great success; some swept away and destroyed by the current of history, they all became alive in our imagination, reaching out to us through the letters engraved on marble and Mr. Jin's voice.

"Here are my immediate family members," says Mr. Jin, pointing out numerous unmarked little mounds around us. "My father is here and my brother is over there." While most of his family members immigrated to Israel, Mr. Jin chose to stay in Kaifeng, dedicating all his life savings and indeed most of his life to building this monument. "In our tradition," he says, "older generation has to pass family history to the young ones. So, my siblings and I always knew that we were Jewish."

And so did the Chinese government. Every family in China is required to have a household register, called a Hukou. This system has its origins in ancient China: family registers were in existence since the 3rd century BC. In modern China, these registers were mandatory since 1958, and Jin's family always registered their "nationality" as Jewish. In



1985, says Mr. Jin, the government took Hukou books away from those who considered themselves Jews and changed their nationality: in case of the Jins, to Han Chinese.

In a country that neither accepts Judaism as one of its official religions nor includes Jews among its other 56 minority groups, and in a city where the last Rabbi died over 150 years ago and no synagogue exists, Mr. Jin's family lights candles on Shabbat and abstains from pork. Sometimes on Jewish holidays they get together with other families of similar background. Proud of their Jewish origins, considering themselves Jewish to the core, the Jins continue telling their story. True to the Confucian culture of their country, Jin's family kept their genealogical records for many centuries. When the government confiscated records, a secretly made copy of it was securely hidden. And then – reborn as Mr. Jin's marble monument to his ancestors and to the eternal Jewish spirit.

The Story of Esther, a Kaifeng Jew

This is exactly what Guo Yan Zhao prints on her business card: *Kaifeng Jew*. In large bold letters, she announces to the world both her identity and her occupation. Above this brave proclamation, is a required qualifier in small letters and almost unnoticeable: "a descendant of." Guo Yan chose Esther as her Jewish name because Chinese Jews think of her as a prophetic, matriarchal figure from the Bible. Esther's card also has her photo wearing Mogen David-shaped earrings and dressed in a traditional Chinese gown made of blue and white (Israeli colors) silk and decorated with Jewish stars. Two ancient cultures seamlessly blend together and become both- Esther's personality and her life's work. For every Jewish pilgrim coming to Kaifeng, this petite vivacious young woman is an institution by herself.

Esther meets us in the heart of medieval Kaifeng on a narrow street called "Teaching the Torah Lane." This was a neighborhood where Jews of Kaifeng used to live and pray for almost 800 years. Now the hospital and the nursing facility stand where the ancient synagogue, first built in 1163, used to be. But this is not the end of the Kaifeng Jewish story. Not – as far as Esther is concerned. The copper plaque next to the street's name proclaims "Here live Kaifeng Jews (the Zhao residence)." Zhao is Esther's family

name.

"I love both of my cultures," says Esther as she leads us along the old street to her family house. "You know – why? Because we are the two oldest civilizations in the world and we share a lot in common." As Esther puts it, both Jews and Chinese have large diasporas outside of their homeland; both peoples emphasize the high importance of family ties and education (a "sacred pursuit," says Esther), and both are marked by an entrepreneurial spirit. And a talent to survive and persevere, she adds.

The Chinese government does not recognize us as Jews, continues Esther, and the rabbis don't consider us Jewish either. She looks at us almost defiantly: "But we are THEY, the Chinese Jews, the Kaifeng Jews." Out of her handbag, she takes out a worn photocopy of DNA test results done in the late 1980s when about 90 Kaifeng Jewish decedents were tested. "See here," she says. "We are as Jewish as you are." Learning that my husband and I are both former Soviet émigrés, she cannot resist: "More so than the Soviet Jews who intermarry both ways. Not just along the male line like us."

Like her Biblical namesake, Esther is on a mission. "It is my job," she proudly states, "to bring back a strong sense of Kaifeng Jewish tradition and not let it get lost in history as it did before." And Esther has a plan. Long-term, she promotes to the government her ambitious proposal of re-building a synagogue and creating an Israeli-Chinese Cultural park and short-term, she educates visitors, one person at a time.

A small house where Esther was born and raised, and where her family lived for generations, used to be a part of the ancient synagogue structure. Throughout the entire history of Jewish Kaifeng, Esther says; her family was charged with maintaining the synagogue, and when it was ruined by recurring floods, with supervising its reconstruction. Now her house bears a proud name: The Kaifeng Jewish History Memorial Center. The centuries-old door frame has a mezuzah and the door – a small Israeli flag. The first thing one sees when entering the house is a large banner with the *Shema* prayer, a central statement of Jewish theology, written in golden letters: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Esther explains that during the Ming Dy-

nasty, around the 14th or the 15th century, the Chinese Emperor demanded that his portrait be placed in every house of worship. So the Kaifeng Jews had no choice but to obey and they placed the portrait in the entryway to the synagogue, but above it, they hung a *Shema*: in Kaifeng, the God of the Jews was above even the all-powerful Emperor of China!

The Jewish history center we enter is a one-room display of numerous family pictures and documents, and booklets and articles on Chinese Jewish history in Hebrew, Chinese and English – all surrounded by menorahs, Shabbat candles, and Israeli flags. A large framed rendering of Kaifeng Synagogue by an 18th-century Jesuit is proudly placed in the center of the back wall. Underneath it is a wooden model of that synagogue as it is shown in the Tel Aviv Diaspora museum. We buy a nicely-illustrated brochure authored by the "Kaifeng Jew Esther" about that synagogue and the History Center she created.

Esther starts her story with the Name, not her family name, but the names the Jews were called in their new home country: for how your neighbors call you, says a lot about how you are perceived and accepted. (Growing up in the Soviet Union, we remember being called "Zhudy" (Kikes) or "Israeli aggressors," so we could not agree with her more).

The sinew-plucking religion

Chinese people never had prejudice against foreigners coming down the Silk Road or those settling in their midst. Whether they were Jews or Muslims from Persia or Christians from the West, the Chinese called them all "people with colored eyes." When the Jews settled in Kaifeng, they were called "Lan Mao Hui Hui," which meant "Blue Hat Muslims" because of the blue hats they wore when going to the synagogue. "White Hat Muslims" was the name for those who wore white hats when praying at the mosque. To add to this confusion, both Muslims and Jews gave the same Chinese name to their houses of worship: Qing Zhen, "Pure Truth." Though neither ate pork, the Jews also prepared their meat in accordance with the *kashrut* law: removing the thigh muscles (sinews) from hip sockets of the slaughtered animals. It was done in reference to the Biblical story of Jacob sustaining a thigh injury while wrestling with an angel; and that was so peculiar to their Chinese neigh-