



# Points East

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

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## In Memoriam: Denise Yeh Bresler, z"l

Denise Yeh Bresler, cherished wife of Jack Bresler; beloved mother of Michael (Rivka), Daniel, and Gabriel Bresler; and longtime SJI Managing Board member; died on October 19, 2018. May her memory and activism on behalf of the Kaifeng Jews be for a blessing.

### A Tribute, By Eric Rothberg

I was greatly saddened to learn of the passing of Denise Yeh-Bresler, z"l. I knew her as Hemei Ayi (Aunt Hemei).

Denise and I worked together on many projects aimed at aiding the Jewish community in Kaifeng. It is hard to sum up the work that we did, but suffice it to say that we spent long tireless hours on it. We sacrificed our time to try and make a difference. We had a great deal of optimism for Kaifeng Jewry during those years.

Denise was one of the pivotal figures in our group of volunteers. She found many people to join our volunteer efforts. In the summer of 2010, I returned from Kaifeng and began a regular regimen of online remote teaching at the school. Denise joined me after a few months and we began taking turns teaching biweekly. She helped me to transition into expanded volunteer efforts. Soon, enough volunteer teachers appeared that both of us could discontinue teaching and move on to other pressing issues.

Early on, I had struggled as one of the few Chinese-speaking native English speakers involved in intensive volunteer services. Denise came as a gift from Hashem (God), and took a huge weight off my shoulders. I don't think I ever thanked her fully enough for her contribution. We were equal partners as remote volunteers/teachers. She was a driving force in our work. She was responsible for so much. Together we solidified Jewish cultural knowledge amongst our students, organized monetary and logistical support for the Beit Hatikvah school and its members, and embarked on an untold number of other projects. Denise and I made so many plans for our avodah (work/service) to the Kaifeng Jewish community, but we will never be able to fulfill them now.

We succeeded in building up the Beit Hatikvah school into a strong, thriving communal institution. Built upon the alliance of the three clans (Ai, Zhao, and Li), this school experienced significant achievements.

As a board member of SJI, Denise was a true diplomat. Back then, we did our best to work with two other organizations, Kulanu and Shavei Israel, to maintain Beit Hatikvah's success. Together, our three organizations made for a thriving educational environment. Denise helped me to work between organizations, though we had

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## Encounters Between Chinese and Jewish Civilizations

By Shalom Salomon Wald

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### Comparing Two Civilizations

Comparison of Chinese and Jewish civilizations does not seem an obvious choice. At first glance, the differences between Chinese and Jewish history, numbers, language, religion, and more are enormous. Yet since 1605, when Jesuit missionary Matteo

Ricci in Beijing encountered for the first time a Chinese Jew, meetings between Chinese and Jews, as well as thoughts about their similarities, have fascinated the Western mind.<sup>1</sup> Belgian–Australian sinologist Pierre Ryckmans called China “the oldest living civilization on earth.” He explained its long duration by spiritual memory, language, and the written word, and added an interesting afterthought: “only the Jewish tradition may present a significant parallel to the phenomenon of (China’s) spiritual continuity.”<sup>2</sup> This essay will discuss encounters between Chinese and Jews in old and recent times, both inside and outside of China, and add a reflection on a religious similarity between the two civilizations that has had enormous historical consequences for both.

### The Jews of Kaifeng

The first long-lasting encounter between the Chinese and Jewish civilizations took place in Kaifeng, Henan Province, the ancient capital of the Song dynasty. Jews traveled and traded on the Silk Roads to China during the Tang dynasty, but a small, stable Jewish community could be found in China only since the Northern

Song dynasty (960–1127).

These Jews came from the Middle East, mostly Persia, but when exactly they arrived—allegedly invited by a Song emperor—is not known. They built a synagogue and were prosperous, and a relatively large number passed the difficult Chinese civil service exams under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and became Chinese officials, serving also in the military. Kaifeng synagogue inscriptions list eighty Jewish officials between 1489 and 1679. One of them, Zhao Yingcheng (1619–1657?), achieved the high, very rare jinshi rank. He held senior positions (Ministry of Justice Director, Emissary to Fujian to fight outlaws, and more). Late in his short life, he returned to Kaifeng to rebuild the synagogue that had been devastated by the 1642 Yellow River flood.<sup>3</sup> In the nine-

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**FROM THE EDITOR**

I have just returned from Singapore where I attended the Asia Progressive Judaism's summit "Jews in Asia." This four day event brought together religiously liberal Jews from many points in Asia: from various cities in China, Australia, and Indonesia; from India; Singapore, Myanmar; South Korea; Thailand; Vietnam; and Japan, as well as other delegates from Canada, Israel, the U.K., and the U.S.A.

Although many delegates were of Ashkenazi European origins, there also was a substantial number of Chinese, Indonesian and other Asian ethnicities present as well. We were quite a diverse lot ethnically, religiously and politically. Kudos to Rabbi Nathan Alfred and his team for hosting and organizing this event!

Of course, what interested me the most was the Chinese aspect of the conference. I was there to present on the history and current situation of the Kaifeng Jews and to hold a meeting to discuss their educational options, but I could not help noticing how many of the Singaporean Jewish community had intermarried and were raising their children as Jews. And not just them. Apparently Perth, Australia has a large Jewish-Chinese intermarried population and then there are other smaller mixings taking place in Melbourne, Sydney, Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Wherever the Jewish and Chinese diasporas overlap, they are creating a new generation of Sino-Judaic children. One of the topics we discussed is the need for Jewish books and digital offerings in Chinese. Not surprisingly, the traditional Hebrew-Chinese siddur (prayerbook) that Barnaby Yeh created while he was SJI's teacher in Kaifeng is one of the few bilingual resources available. A Pesach haggadah would be most helpful and a Chinese translation of the Tanakh, as opposed to the existing Christian translations of the Old Testament, would be something basic as well.

Another item that caught my attention was the centuries-old trading routes between Iraq/Iran and the rest of Asia, which form an arc of commerce from those countries to South India to Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia and up the coast to the Chinese port cities. The Europeans didn't create these routes; they just took them over. More significantly, at least for our field, it seems to confirm Jordan Paper's thesis, mentioned in his article in this issue, that Jews settled as traders on the Chinese coast first and then moved inland to Kaifeng via the Grand Canal and

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**Points East**

Anson Laytner, Editor

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## From the Editor

(continued from page 2)

Huang (Yellow) River.

Also featured in this issue is a loving tribute by Eric Rothberg to the recently deceased Denise Yeh Bresler, an SJI Board member who actively championed the educational needs of the Kaifeng Jews. SJI, with the involvement of her family, has set up a fund in her memory that will provide scholarships for Kaifeng Jews to study Jewish culture abroad. In the short time it has been active it has raised close to US\$ 3,000. Please consider adding your own two cents to this worthwhile and much-needed endeavor. We thank you in advance for your generosity.

Anson Laytner

### Important Notice to Readers About PE Archives

All readers of Points East may now access back issues of this journal as the result of a decision by its Managing Board.

To access the archives, go to the "Members' Section" on the far right of our website homepage ([www.sino-judaic.org](http://www.sino-judaic.org)) and click on "Archived Issues." The username is "member" and the password is "Gabow"—in honor of the late Leo Gabow, SJI's founding president.

## In The Field

### • Shanghai Series at the University of Chicago

The Shanghai Jews: Risk and Resilience in a Refugee Community is an event series at the University of Chicago exploring the experience of Jewish refugees who escaped to Shanghai during World War II. This series opens with an exhibit (January 15-March 30th) on the third floor of the Regenstein Library, featuring unique historical objects, documents, and photographs donated by families who lived in Shanghai during the war.

On March 13th, at 5:30 pm in Fulton Hall, the University will host Michael Blumenthal, who came of age in Japanese-occupied Shanghai and then went on to become President Carter's Secretary of the Treasury. Following his keynote conversation with Creative Writing faculty member and novelist Rachel DeWoskin, there will be a concert of wartime classical music, performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's assistant concertmaster, violinist Yuan-Qing Yu, and her quartet, Civitas Ensemble.

On March 14th, a day-long symposium will be held at the Franke Institute, featuring conversations between University of Chicago faculty and invited guests on topics including the experience of the Shanghai Jews; Iraqi Jewish business networks and the financial history of the Jewish elites in China; the literature of war-time childhood and adolescence; the role of fiction in creating and remembering history; the musical and artistic history and legacy of the Shanghai Jews; and readings of both Holocaust-era and contemporary poetry and prose.

### • Mazal tov to Profs. Hochstadt, Ostoyich, Pan and Xu

The Shanghai Refugees Museum has formed an Advisory Committee, which includes two SJI Managing Board members and one member of our International Advisory Board. The following is a list of professors and scholars who have agreed to join:

Cathy Barbash, Abraham Cooper, Mitchell Duneier, Steve Hochstadt, Kevin Ostoyich, Pan Guang, Wang Jian, Bernard Wasserstein, Xu Xin, Xia Yun.

### • Mazal tov to Faith Goldman (and Naomi too)

Faith's daughter, Naomi, was chosen as one of the Los Angeles Jewish Journal's 2019 Mentshes. As a child growing up in New York, Naomi Goldman often heard her father's wartime stories. The late Robert Goldman was one of the "Shanghai Jews" who grew up in Shanghai's Hongkou District ghetto until his teens. "My father's challenging past to get to this country was very formative for me," Naomi Goldman said. "I was always taught to think about how to give my time, talent and resources to good causes and vulnerable populations, such as immigrants like my father." Goldman began her career in talent management but only enjoyed the part where she'd connect clients to charities because she wanted her life's work "to impact causes and communities." Today, Goldman carries on the legacy of her parents, supporting a variety of progressive causes. "Whatever I've done in my life, whether it's around community engagement, volunteering, philanthropy, serving on boards, it comes from being raised by exceptional role models — my parents," she said.

## In Memoriam

(continued from page 1)

both become SJI board members. Denise wanted the best for Kehillat Kaifeng, and she did an amazing job in her work. She lobbied for our success, working with multiple organizations, rabbis, generous donors, and fellow volunteers.

While I might talk about the work I did, I would be a fool if I mentioned it without first thanking people like Denise who made it possible. If I failed in any way in Kaifeng, it was because I left the counsel of those like her—people wise beyond their years. While I have called Denise my fellow volunteer for all these years, she was really my mentor and dear friend.

After we had endeavored for some time on behalf of the kehillah, times came when things began to fall apart. This saddened everyone. I was not strong enough to continue our work. But, Denise never gave up, and never lost hope.

Though I mentioned some of the events and trials that we went through, what really matters to me isn't what we did or didn't do in our avodah (work/service). Today, I look at what really was. I look at the passion we had for what we did. I gaze into a past of hopes and

dreams. What was most important? It was the times we shared together in such unbounded hope. The energy we gave to our work will never disappear, as long as the tiniest memory of it remains.

Denise made things REAL for me. She helped me to connect the dots. We talked about life. We discussed the future. She was an amazing individual. Denise was incredibly driven and focused. Now I realize that people like her helped me to do whatever I did. We made history... NO, Denise made history. I wasn't from China, so I couldn't entirely understand my students. But Denise? As someone born in Taiwan, she could understand more completely. But, her understanding was not merely cultural or linguistic. Far from it! She had great kindness and compassion. Denise could really understand a person. She looked into people's hearts and comprehended. She was an amazing and kind person, someone really fun and inspiring to work with. Denise explained things so clearly to our students. She could teach in ways that I couldn't. Her wisdom brought everyone together. Denise's dedication brought us to great heights. She represented everyone fairly. She served as a liaison to

Kaifeng Jewry and helped them to broadcast their voice to the West.

With all the time I spent with her over phone or computer, I regrettably never met her in person. It's rather amazing that someone made such a difference in my life without ever meeting me physically.

Denise, I will remember you fondly. You helped me so much. You worked hard for a cause you believed in. I wish I had gotten back to you when I had the chance. I am only thankful that I was able to hear your voicemail message once more yesterday. Denise, everything seems like a lifetime ago. I'll try to remember the good times. I deeply miss you Hemei Ayi. God bless you. May you be remembered for a blessing! Amen ve'amen!

### Painless Donating

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## Encounters

(continued from page 1)

teenth century, Kaifeng's economic misery, civil wars, and assimilation greatly reduced and impoverished the community. Traveling out of Kaifeng through the bandit-infested Henan Province was dangerous, and in contrast to Kaifeng Muslims who suffered no less, the Jews...were a minuscule local island, barely visible in the vast cultural ocean of dynastic China. They incorporated China into their culture; China's culture did not incorporate Judaism but gave the Jews a place to live and prosper. The Jews developed over 700 years what has been called a "creative cultural interaction" with their Chinese environment.<sup>4</sup> The Jews took Chinese lifestyles, dress, names, and sometimes concubines. They adopted the Chinese family lineage system through which everyone traced his or her origin to an ancestor, name, and location. If the ancestor was a Jew, the whole family was Jewish. The Jews' accommodation to Chinese tradition allowed them to be Chinese without ceasing to be Jews.

For the Chinese, they were just one of China's numerous religious sects with a leader, a holy book, celebrations, and dietary customs. They were not seen as a small branch of a much larger global religion. The Jews of Kaifeng adapted the biblical story to Chinese understanding and wrote that their laws were handed down by a long line of wise men. All this was perfectly acceptable to Confucians. Equally acceptable were the Jewish laws of ritual observance, because this was exactly what Confucius had demanded when he said that spiritual cultivation required the *li* (ritual observance). On one issue—the notion of God—Judaism could accept no compromise and no accommodation: in Judaism, God is One; he has no visible corporal form and no pronounceable name. The Kaifeng Jewish texts scorn idolatry, which should have pleased Confucian intellectuals because they too looked down upon the superstitions and widespread popular image worship of the Chinese masses. And which term did the Jewish texts use for "God"? *T'ien* or *Tian*, "heaven," which in Confucianism is the supreme source of goodness and virtue or the supreme law ordering the world. The corresponding Hebrew word for heaven, *Shamayim*, can often be found in rabbinic scripture as a synonym for God. "Everything is in the hands of Heaven (=God) except for the fear of Heaven (=God)," says the *Talmud*.<sup>5</sup> Is the semblance of *Tian* and *Shamayim* a simple coincidence?

The Kaifeng experience is unique in Jewish history. It shows that Jews could build bridges to Confucianism, China's dominant ethical value system. They could not build such bridges to any other belief or religion during the same periods. Confucianism never asked the Jews to convert or worship foreign gods or prophets. Also, the Confu-

cian rites of ancestor worship were compatible with Jewish religion: on their main holy days, observant Jews still say the *Yiskor* (remembrance) prayer to commemorate their deceased parents and families.

Only in the nineteenth century did some Jewish intellectuals in the West hear of this remote city where Jews were not discriminated against. During these years, the expanding colonial powers despised a weak, conflict-ridden China. The Jews who knew the Kaifeng story did not. Ironically, when Kaifeng's Jewry was thriving, it was virtually unknown in the wider Jewish world. Only when it was dying did it become a link between China and the Jewish people.

### The 19th and 20th Centuries: Chinese Views of Jews and Jewish Impacts

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese travelers for the first time discovered that there were Jews across the world, and more importantly, they noted that in the West and Russia, Jews were often discriminated against. Some of them responded with sympathy because they saw the perceived oppression of the Jews as similar to the oppression of China by Western powers. One of China's leading reformers, Kang Youwei, wrote in 1909 that the Jews were thrown "into abuse and difficulty" because they had no country of their own.<sup>6</sup> Similar feelings of affinity animated the founder and first President of the Chinese Republic, Sun Yatsen. In 1920 and 1924, he drew parallels between the fate of the Chinese and Jews, and supported the right of the Jews to restore their nation in their ancient homeland. Shortly after, China gave its support to the Balfour Declaration, the 1917 document that opened the way to the creation of the modern state of Israel.

During the twentieth century, literature and languages of the Jewish people became known to Chinese intellectuals. The first complete and accurate translation of the Hebrew Bible appeared in modern Chinese.<sup>7</sup> Chinese writers, e.g., Mao Dun, appreciated the Bible not for religious reasons, but as great literature and history. However, until World War II, the national Jewish language spoken by the greatest number of Jews was not yet Hebrew, but Yiddish—a dialect of ancient German with many Hebrew words. Yiddish had a rich literature of which a few dozen works were translated into Chinese during the 1920s and '30s. The appearance of these books in China coincided with heated debates about the need to reform the Chinese language.

Some language reformers saw in Yiddish the right model of a language that could be understood by the large masses of the people—a model that China should follow. However, the main Jewish contribution to China—if this is what it was—was indirect. A historian called the twentieth century "the Jewish century."<sup>8</sup> The contributions of Jews to the civilizations of the world

changed China, too. But are they "Jewish" contributions? Karl Marx was a German Jew, and Chinese Communists still respect him greatly, but Chinese communism had enough indigenous features not to be labeled as a "Jewish" development. Another example: author Franz Kafka can be read in Chinese translation. Kafka is "the Jewish writer . . . who may yet redefine Jewish culture for us," wrote one historian of literature.<sup>9</sup> Many interpret Kafka's work as a metaphor for the alienation of Western Jews, but one of his Chinese translators proposed that his work describes the alienation of the working classes from the capitalist system—he converted Kafka back into Marx.<sup>10</sup> Albert Einstein is another great name of the twentieth century, widely admired in China. Does Chinese admiration for Einstein create a point of connection between the Chinese and Jewish civilizations? There are no simple answers to these questions. The answer is easier for American Jewish writers, such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth, who first became available in Chinese in the 1980s. They introduced Chinese readers to some aspects of Jewish life and thought. Today, large numbers of Chinese have become aware of Jews and Judaism through the Jewish refugee communities that survived the Second World War in Shanghai.

The Jews are not always the best judges to understand Chinese views pertaining to Judaism. Rabbi Adin Steinsalz, widely respected in the Jewish world for his work on the *Talmud*, wrote after a visit to China "what [the Chinese] found in Judaism, most Jews don't see."<sup>11</sup> For example, one of China's main Judaic scholars justified teaching and research about Judaism as essential for China. He asserted that the Jews have modernized their civilization successfully while remaining loyal to their ancient roots, whereas the Chinese, in contrast, have failed to do so.<sup>12</sup> His statement is obviously tailored for a Chinese audience. Many Jews do not see it, particularly when they watch the tensions and clashes between the ultraorthodox and the secular in Israel and elsewhere.

### The 19th and 20th Centuries: Jewish Views of China and Chinese Cultural Influence

First modern Jewish reactions to China were sympathetic, as noted above. Already in 1911, in Ottoman Palestine, a Jewish author, S. M. Perlmann, published the first Hebrew book about China, *Ha-Sinim* (The Chinese). The book was translated into other languages, including Russian and English, which testified to a more widespread Jewish interest in China. In Eastern Europe, there were many Yiddish books and newspaper articles about China. Little is known about this because the great majority of their authors, readers, books, and articles were destroyed during the Holocaust.

European interest in China is old. It began

at least with Marco Polo's Asian travelogue in the thirteenth century and reached a peak in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when Jesuit missionaries and the leading Enlightenment philosophers, e.g., Leibniz and Voltaire, wrote extensively about China. European Jews joined the discussion much later, after the old political, social, and academic discriminations against them had begun to weaken. Thus, only in the twentieth century did German, French, and British Jews, as scholars and art collectors, play a significant role in introducing Chinese culture to the European public. In the latter half of the century, American Jews played an equally important role.

One of America's leading China scholars, the late Benjamin Schwartz of Harvard, said that his and other Jewish scholars' interest in China's relationship to its past was intimately linked to their own relationship to their Jewish past. Schwartz saw a historical affinity between Chinese and Jews.<sup>13</sup> The role of Jewish art collectors cannot be overestimated. Visual art is one of the most effective ways to present China to a larger public. Some of the great Chinese art collections in the museums of New York, Washington, Berlin, Paris, and London bear the names of their Jewish donors.

### China and Israel

Even before Israel's creation in 1948, and again several years later, Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, called on the Jewish people and Israel to seek links of friendships with China and India. He called them the great civilizations of Asia and predicted that they would become the world's leading powers. Ben-Gurion used the term "civilization" deliberately: he looked at long-term historical trends, not at immediate economic or other material interests, and this at a time when very few in the West believed that China or India would ever rise to great power status.<sup>14</sup> The relations between China and Israel since 1949 are too complex and multifaceted to lend themselves to quick review. Economic, cultural, and personal relations are growing. Book translations, exhibitions, TV shows, and more than ten major universities with Jewish and Israeli study centers keep increasing the number of Chinese with knowledge of Israel and Judaism.

Looking toward the future of Sino-Jewish relations, "The sky is the limit," as they say. And what is the sky? Most of what the Chinese want to learn from the Jews and Israel is utilitarian and short term, from water technologies to fighting terrorism, or at the most vulgar popular level, how to get rich quickly. On the other side, Jews and Israel are looking for business and market opportunities, like everybody else, but there is also a strong intellectual Jewish interest in China's culture and history.

Both sides should reach higher and look further. The Chinese might want to reflect

on the ethical and spiritual factors that allowed a people as small as the Jews to maintain its identity and exert its civilizational influence in the wider world. In contrast to China, the Jews were for a long time without "hard" power or a territorial base. In turn, the Jews could benefit from reflecting on a core concept of Chinese thought, the notion of change. As *The Book of Changes* (I Ching) and Laozi's *Daodejing* show, change is permanent and inevitable. All phenomena are dynamic; all situations are continuously transformed. When life and history move in one direction, the movement will stop short before it reaches an extreme and swing back into the opposite direction. This notion of inevitable change still influences Chinese thought and policy.

China's old philosophy of history is cyclical. Dynasties rise and fall; they come and go. The universe has neither beginning nor end. In Jewish religious philosophy, in contrast, history moves forward in one direction—from a beginning to an end. Of course the Jews knew major changes, more than they asked for, which were often triggered by major catastrophes, but they were less inclined to see them as an inevitable part of life and history.

### The Tension between Universalism and Particularism in Non-missionary Religions—Parallels between Judaism and Confucianism

There is more that the Chinese and Jews could learn from each other's history. Are there similarities in the historical fate of Judaism and Confucianism linked to their religions or philosophies? Whether Confucianism is a "religion" in the Western sense or a philosophy continues to be debated in the West, as well as in China. No simple answer is in sight, least of which is because the Chinese term for religion does not mean exactly the same as in the West. Suffice it to say here that Judaism and Confucianism are two non-missionary belief systems accompanied by ethical precepts and practical rituals. The two beliefs do not try to convert the rest of the world to their own dogmas. During some periods, Jews as well as Chinese did try to force their beliefs on minorities (e.g., the Hasmonean/Maccabean King of Judea, John Hyrcanus, who reigned 134–104 BCE, conquered the Idumean tribe and converted it by force to Judaism). Rabbinic Judaism condemned him for this. Herodes (Herod), Roman-appointed King of Judea who ruled from 37–4 BCE, was Idumean. These were exceptions, not the rule. In contrast, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are global missionary religions that seek deliverance from suffering for all humans in the first case, and salvation through conversion in the other two cases. The defining characteristic of a non-missionary religion or philosophy, at least in the two cultures addressed in this essay, is a strong degree of particularism.

The Jews are the "chosen people"—chosen by God to be an ethical model. China is the "middle kingdom"—the most significant country and the center of the world. However, to be non-missionary does not mean indifference to the rest of the world. There is a universalistic component in non-missionary religions as well, and a concealed or open tension between particularism and universalism. The balance between universalistic and the dominant particularistic impulses is changing through history, often in response to external events.

On the other hand, missionary religions are never free of particularistic elements. Buddhism and Islam claim to bring deliverance or salvation to all humans, but India and Arabia enjoy an exalted place in the memory of the two religions simply because the founders were Indian in one case, Arab in the other, and their holy books were written in their respective national languages.

Judaism is the religion of one man, Abraham; one family; one group of tribes; one people. Traditional Judaism does not seek but accepts converts, and promises salvation to non-Jews who follow a number of Jewish laws. But universalism is woven into the Hebrew Bible from the first page on and followed up in the Talmud. The Bible starts not with the creation of the Jews but with the creation of the human race.

The self-definition of the early Chinese was apparently less ethnic than that of the early biblical Jews. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties (estimated 1556–1046 and 1046–256 BCE, respectively), the borderline between the Chinese and the "Barbarians" was not seen as ethnic or racial but as cultural. This is what allowed early China to expand by slowly absorbing and acculturating these "Barbarians."<sup>15</sup> The Chinese belief that their culture was superior to all others implied also a claim of universality. In *The Analects*, Confucius formulated succinctly his conviction that the borders between Chinese and "Barbarians" were not closed: "The Master expressed a wish to live among the nine barbaric tribes of the East. Somebody said: 'But they are so ignorant. How is this possible?' The Master said, 'Where a man of culture resides one cannot speak of ignorance!'"<sup>16</sup>

However, Confucian universalisms probably did not extend beyond East and Central Asia—the regions the Chinese knew and controlled during the time of their greatest geographic expansion. In later periods of Chinese history, particularistic, ethnocentric, and xenophobic positions became more prominent. When the barbaric tribes threatened the borders of Southern Song dynasty China in the 1120s, ethnic antagonism against them became a patriotic duty. Now culture could no longer override ethnic boundaries. Generally, ethnic hatred was expressed against the Mongol conquerors who destroyed the Song and ruled China during the Yuan dynasty, and again against the Manchus who created China's

last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912). The Manchus' eagerness to adopt Confucianism did not make them less foreign in the eyes of Chinese patriots. Over time, although Confucian intellectuals did not abandon all their universalism, popular Chinese ethnocentrism and particularism became more similar to that of the Jews. It made no difference whether particularism was primarily ethnic or cultural; in either case, it was not missionary.

Chinese Buddhists did sometimes proselytize, but in general, Chinese and Jews abstained from global missionary propaganda and expansion during most of their history. However, this did not protect them from encroachments and invasions by missionary religions—quite the contrary. It seems that non-missionary religions are particularly susceptible to invasion by their missionary competitors. Here, some similarities between the fate of the Chinese and Jewish civilizations can be noted. In South Asia, Buddhism became missionary from Buddha's time on (fifth century BCE or later), but it entered China only approximately in the second century CE, hundreds of years afterward. Exact dates remain controversial. From then on, the two most dynamic missionary religions of the time, Buddhism and Christianity, attacked the two non-missionary civilizations, those of China and the Jews, with irresistible force. Buddhism spread in China and became dominant in the sixth and seventh centuries. The outward-looking pluralistic attitude of the ruling Tang dynasty certainly helped Buddhism gain adherents, but there were more compelling spiritual forces at work. Buddhism was at odds with China's traditions and indigenous wisdom. The latter apparently no longer satisfied the spiritual longings of large numbers of people. The new universalistic faith from India promised all humans liberation from suffering, and this did satisfy the longings of many. The Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), among others, strongly encouraged the spread of Buddhism. Generally, during these centuries, Buddhism was sometimes courted and sometimes attacked, both in north and south China. Finally, in the mid-ninth century, the Chinese state felt so threatened by the success of Buddhism that Emperor Wuzong of the Tang launched an anti-Buddhist sweep across the country, closed most monasteries, and expelled its monks and nuns. His edict of 845 CE on the suppression of Buddhism is a harsh indictment of the harm the new religion is accused to have done to China. The state's persecution did not extinguish Buddhism, but the new religion never regained the wealth and power it had enjoyed before.

There are parallels and also a major difference with Jewish history. When the Apostle Paul discarded the Jewish religious laws that protected the Jews' particularism, he turned Christianity into a universalistic faith comparable to Buddhism. Christian univer-

salism and lack of ritual restrictions exerted great attraction for the pagan populations of the late Roman Empire, and Judaism could not compete. The new faith soon enough attacked Judaism with lethal intentions. From the fourth century on, Christianity became the state religion. The anti-Jewish edicts of Roman Emperor Constantine (of 329 CE and the following years) and later emperors aimed to humiliate and constrain Jewish religion, close or limit Jewish houses of worship, prohibit conversion to Judaism, and more. In spite of very different historical contexts, and without any direct link, the anti-Jewish hostility in Constantine's edicts sounds strangely similar to the strong anti-Buddhist feelings in the Tang Emperor's edict of 845. In other words, state power was essential in Chinese and Jewish religious history during the same centuries. However, in the Jewish case, the state, Christian as it was, fought for the new religion against the old; in the Chinese case, it fought for the old, against the new. The Jews could not fight back to defend the old religion. They had lost their state and independence.

In later centuries, the Chinese and the Jews had to cope with additional universalistic religions with missionary intentions. Christianity entered China while in Europe, and it continued its pressure on the Jews. From the seventh and eighth centuries on, Islam tried to convert both the Chinese and the Jews. But these efforts did not shape the history of the Chinese and the Jews as profoundly as Buddhism had for the Chinese and early Christianity had for the Jews. Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did new universalistic creeds arise that had deep, history-shaping effects on Chinese and Jews: communism and socialism. Both are universalistic creeds that have their roots in the Jewish Bible's quest for social justice and equality.

The Chinese and Jewish civilizations are broader and older than the two states that are their main centers today: the People's Republic of China and the state of Israel. These two states will help decide for their nations the balance between particularism and universalism, between the pursuit of national interests alone and outreach to the wider world. If history teaches us anything, it is that it can be dangerous to ignore universalism and outreach. This is what the Chinese and the Jews could learn from each other.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Salomon Wald, "Chinese Jews in European Thought," in Youtai: Presence and Perception of Jews and Judaism in China, ed. Peter Kupfer (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 217. This book also has many chapters on Jews in old China. There is substantial scholarly literature on this subject. See The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng: A Millennium of Adaptation and Endurance, ed. Anson H. Laytner and Jordan Paper (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), and The Jews of China: Historical and Comparative Perspectives, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Goldstein

(Armonk, New York; London, England: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), mentioned in later endnotes. The pioneering study on this subject was Michael Pollak, *Mandarins, Jews, and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980). See also Irene Eber, *Chinese and Jews: Encounters between Cultures* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2002); and *From Kaifeng to Shanghai: Jews in China*, ed. Roman Malek (Nettetal: Monumenta Serica Sankt Augustin, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Ryckmans, "The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 39 (The Australian National University, Department of Far Eastern History, Canberra, March 1989): 1, 2, 7, 13, footnote 1.

<sup>3</sup> Moshe Y. Bernstein, "Zhao Yingchen from Fact to Fiction," *The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng: A Millennium of Adaptation and Endurance*, eds. Laytner and Paper (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 97.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew H. Plaks, "The Confucianization of the Kaifeng Jews: Interpretations of the Kaifeng Stelae Inscriptions," *The Jews of China*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Goldstein, Armonk, New York; London, England: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 39.

<sup>5</sup> *Babylonian Talmud Berachoth*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Shalom Salomon Wald, *China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era*, (Jerusalem; New York: Gefen, 2004), 48. Other Chinese voices on the treatment of European Jews are quoted in this chapter.

<sup>7</sup> See Irene Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible*: S. I. J. Schereschewsky (1831-1906), (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Harold Bloom, foreword to Y. Ch. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996), xxii.

<sup>10</sup> Irene Eber, "The Critique of Western Judaism in The Castle and Its Transposition in Two Chinese Translations," *Kafka and China*, ed. Adrian Hsia (Bern-Berlin: Peter Lang, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Adin Steinsalz, "Talmudist Meets Puzzled Jews in Russia's Far East," *The Forward*, June 28, 2002, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Fu Youde, University of Shandong in Jinan. Other Judaic scholars of China, e.g., Xu Xin, Pan Guang, and Zhang Qianhong, have put forward similar arguments.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz, "Concluding Essay: Jews and China—Past and Present Encounters," *The Jews of China*, 299.

<sup>14</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, "My Heart Is in the West and I Am at the Ends of the East: Changing Israeli Perceptions of Asia," *The World facing Israel—Israel facing the World*, ed. Alfred Wittstock (Berlin: Frank and Timme, 2011), 242.

<sup>15</sup> Yitzhak Shichor, "Konfuzianismus in einem Land: Einige Betrachtungen zur universalistischen und partikularistischen Kollektividentität in China," *Kulturen der Achsenzeit II*, ed. Shmuel Eisenstadt, (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1992), 91.

<sup>16</sup> Lun Yu IX, 13. Shalom Salomon Wald is a Senior Fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute (JPPI) in Jerusalem. He works on the history of Jewish civilization and the links between the Jewish people/Israel and China and India.

Wald was born in Italy; graduated at the University of Basel in Economics, Sociology, and History; and had a long career at the Paris-based ECD, the West's leading think tank. He specialized in science and technology policy and retired in 2001 as Head of the Biotechnology Unit.

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## How Kehillat Beijing Began

By Roberta Lipson

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I came to Beijing in 1979 (the early days of China's commercial opening to the West) to explore business opportunities. Little did I know, at the time, that I'd meet my business partner there and together, we'd not only build a successful international firm but also lay the groundwork for a Jewish community which brings incredible meaning to our lives and to the lives of those around us.

Firsts are always memorable. At our first Seder in Beijing, we had to teach the Foreign Service International Club kitchen staff how to make gefilte fish, and were lucky enough to have visiting friends bring matzot. After that, we arranged gatherings for major Jewish holidays in various hotel or restaurant venues.

In 1982, we were contacted by an American couple whose college-aged son had contracted a disease in South China from which he likely wouldn't recover. They wanted a Jewish contact in Beijing. When the young man passed away several weeks later, they contacted us again, asking us if we could gather a minyan to say Kadish with them as they passed through Beijing to make arrangements for their son's repatriation. It was a deeply moving experience, and it felt so important to be a Jewish touchpoint in Beijing.

Beijing was becoming an increasingly open city – with ever more visitors and sojourners from the west, including business people, journalists, lawyers, diplomats, tourists and students, and soon we became the contact for people who were looking for a place to “be Jewish” while visiting Beijing.

By the early 1990s, we had found a permanent location for our weekly Kabbalat Shabbat gatherings. A few years later, we founded a Sunday School and began celebrating various life cycle events for our growing community. At that point we made the organization a bit more formal, with a board and bylaws. Key to our bylaws was our value of inclusiveness and egalitarianism... gender blind practice was a critical value. Our prayer books are from the Reconstructionist Movement, but we have consciously chosen not to affiliate. We wanted to remain inclusive and welcoming for all Jews.

Although we enjoyed and often had musical instruments at our Shabbat services, when a more observant family showed up in the community, we put the guitars away for the time they stayed with us. It seemed that every Jew in Beijing knew about us and considered Kehillat Beijing their Jewish home in China.

We heard of a similar “liberal community” that had started gaining traction in Shanghai, but it disappeared shortly after the arrival of an enthusiastic Chabad Shalich family. Therefore, when I received an email from a Rabbi Freundlich from Hong Kong, saying that he was considering moving to Beijing to start a Chabad house, I responded to the letter in a most unwelcoming way. I wrote, “Thank you for your offer to move to Beijing, but we have this Jewish thing under control. We already offer a home for the needs of Jews here, so no need.”

I was afraid that if Chabad came to Beijing with a full time Rabbi, Kehillat Beijing could be eclipsed as was the community in Shanghai. Rabbi Freundlich (who we later discovered goes by Rabbi Shimon) didn't take no for an answer. He wrote that he had decided to come despite my advice that there was no unmet need, but that he assured me that he would totally respect the inclusive community and values of Kehillat Beijing. He said he was coming to offer things that we didn't provide: kosher food and celebrations for holidays which were not in our activity calendar. He promised to coordinate activities which conflicted with ours, in order to offer an elevated level of service

and options to the community, rather than competition.

After Chabad came to Beijing, I was quite surprised find out that there were Jewish people in Beijing who did not attend Kehillat Beijing's events because they were not comfortable with our egalitarian practices. There were a few long-term residents who had been spending Shabbat by themselves for years.

In the 15 years since Chabad has come, both Rabbi Shimon and I have stayed true to our promises of mutual respect. Many of those from Kehillat Beijing (including me) attend Chabad simchas, and Rabbi Shimon once walked eight miles in the snow on Shabbat, before services, to congratulate one of our Bar Mitzvah boys (whom he had taught) and then walked back to officiate at Chabad House services.

I appreciate that people now have a choice of how they want to approach Jewish observance and prayer. Kehillat Beijing exists for those who come from a liberal, conservative, reform, reconstructionist approach and for the many “mixed families”. On the other hand, there are now many people who live in or frequently visit our city who are more comfortable at Chabad services. We all celebrate the diversity we share and find it fulfilling that there are options.

There are many things that we (Chabad and Kehillat Beijing) do together as a community. Rabbi Shimon taught in our Sunday School. Together, the Chabad Rebbitzen and Amy Gendler (from Kehillat Beijing) decided to run a community Sunday school, open to children from across Beijing's Jewish landscape. Chabad and Kehillat Beijing help each other out in many ways, and both groups value the other's existence and openness.

Rabbi Shimon and I joke about that early, suspicious correspondence. We are now both proud of our friendship and our creation of a community that gives people choices but also exemplifies the oneness and unity of the Jewish people.

Roberta Lipson was brought up in Long Island, New York and attended Jewish camp associated with the Conservative movement. After moving to China in 1979, she and Elyse Silverberg co-founded Chidex, a premier American healthcare company in China, and United Family Healthcare – China's International Healthcare network. Roberta holds an MBA from Columbia University and is active on the board of the United Foundation for Children's Health.

## The Adventure of a Former Jewish Seaman in Yeshivabocher Land

By Jordan Paper

While researching my book *The Theology of the Chinese Jews, 1000–1850*, I became familiar with Jewish maritime history, since all but one or two of the Chinese synagogue communities were in seaports, and even the inland ones were in contact with the seaport communities by canal and river barges. Save for the Ashkenazi Jews, whose ancestors probably spread into northern Europe by river craft, Judaism spread around the world via salt-water maritime merchants long before the Diaspora. Yet Ashkenazi Jews tend to be unaware of the great Jewish navigators who many centuries later led the Portuguese and Spanish ships around the world. The Portuguese prince, Henry the Navigator, attained that appellation, not because he went to sea, which he didn't, but because he had the foresight to hire Jewish astronomers, cartographers, and navigators who had been to East Africa, India and China, as well as originators of navigational instruments. These mariners, as well as the Amsterdam based Jewish merchant ship owners and captains (and commanders of the Dutch fleets), and the Jewish pirates of the Barbary coast and the Caribbean, taking their revenge on Spanish and Portuguese ships for the Inquisition, were all Sephardim. Is this fact why Ashkenazi Jews tend to be ignorant of Jewish great maritime achievements and enormous wealth due to controlling the maritime trade (when it was not confiscated by the Inquisition)?

Judaism is more a maritime culture than a terrestrial one – most Jewish communities worldwide are still in seaports. Of the twenty U.S. cities with the largest Jewish populations, seventeen are seaports (ocean, lake and river), and the three cities in Canada with the largest Jewish populations are seaports. Yet one still finds Ashkenazi scholars assuming that the Jewish synagogues in China were begun by merchants who came by the arduous overland caravan route, at a time when the route was in abeyance as it was no longer protected by the Chinese military, and then walked through the entirety of China to the coast, rather than by the far more common, much more comfortable, considerably faster, and far more lucrative sea route; each ship of those times, although far smaller than modern ones, could carry as much as a number of caravans in a single trip. Why caravan merchants would walk 1500 kilometers across China from the terminus of the caravan route in Xi'an (not Kaifeng, which is 500 kilometers further east) to create synagogue communities in seaports is beyond my imagining. People settle in seaports because they are involved with ships and shipping or simply arrived by sea, which is why I was born in Baltimore. This is where my father and his family arrived in America in the 1920s by ship from Amsterdam, after fleeing Poland. (My mother's family arrived in New York in the 1890s by ship from Riga.)

I was blithely unaware of this ignorance because I grew up in a seaport (Baltimore) at a time when

ships from around the world docked downtown, not on the periphery of ports as container ships and tankers do now, and I visited them frequently, longing to sail away on them. As a youth, I read books by skilled Jewish naval seamen, such as Commander Edward Ellsberg of the U.S. Navy during WWII, as well as books about Commodore Uriah Levy during the war of 1812 and Admiral Hyman Rickover, the father of the atomic powered submarine. I was able to ship out as a seaman during summers while a university student because my father was friends with the Jewish president and vice-president of the local Master, Mates and Pilots Union who made the arrangements with other Jewish maritime union leaders. The first time I shipped out, the captain of the tramp tanker on which I sailed was Jewish. Hence, I thought it common knowledge that there were Jewish mariners.

While writing the above-mentioned book, I came across an internet site that detailed how a frum (observant) Jew should observe Shabbos (the Sabbath) while on a cruise. Among the stipulations was the edict that one could not use a motion-activated toilet during Shabbos. Being facetious, one might wonder if this might explain the current penchant for building cruise ships with a majority of cabins having balconies. For if none of the toilets can be used, one would have to revert to the method used by seaman in the pre-toilet days: hang one's rear end over the railing (sailors have been lost at sea that way). This and other similar stipulations hardly encourage a frum Jew to travel by sea, even on a kosher cruise.

During the summer in Victoria, where I now live, the local Lubavitch "mission" is home to teen-age yeshivabochers (yeshiva students) from Brooklyn, sent to Victoria for a few weeks to better enjoy the summer. They spend the morning studying Talmud and the afternoon having a good time. People were encouraged to visit the students in the morning to test them with questions. So given the above stimuli and curious about general Ashkenazi knowledge of and attitudes about maritime travel, I dropped in one summer morning some years ago.

I asked the question: "You are sailing a Jewish merchant ship from Basra to India a thousand years ago and it's Friday evening. What do you do?" The following is the resultant dialogue with the landlubber students.

Students: "Get off the ship."

Me: "You are in the middle of the ocean. If you step off, you will drown."

Students: "Stop working."

Me: "This is a sailing vessel. If you stop working the ship, it will founder, and everyone will drown."

Students: "Have the goyim crew do the work."

Me: "This is a Jewish ship. All of the crew and officers are Jewish."

Students: [long confused silence].

Me: "Imagine you are in the Israeli army. You have sentry duty and it is Shabbos."

Students: "Oh!"

Teacher: "Remember that the injunction to save life takes precedence over any other commandments" (or something to that effect).

The students then agreed that the essential work could be done while leaving the unessential work until after Shabbos. The discussion then devolved into concern over typical Talmudic minutia: What knots could be tied on Shabbos under those circumstances and what knots could not be tied! The question I asked is argued over in both the Jerusalem and Baghdad Talmud, given that maritime activity was the most important aspect of Jewish commercial life even long ago. In these discourses, there is also argument over what kind of knots can be tied on Shabbos. One or more students must have been familiar with the relevant Talmud passages, as they were aware of the Talmudic consensus that only temporary knots could be tied on Shabbos, not permanent ones (being familiar with maritime knots, the difference escapes me). I am certain the students didn't know the actual difference.

This story illustrates the difficulty many Ashkenazi Jews seem to have in comprehending not just life on the sea but Jewish maritime history. Jews spread around the Mediterranean along with Phoenician merchants. They were in all of the Roman ports – refer to the letters of Paul (Saul) in the New Testament who visited and/or wrote to a number of synagogues in the ports along the coast of present-day Turkey. Earlier, Jeremiah was castigating the Jews in the Egyptian seaports, not Israel. Some Berber tribes converted to Judaism and were among the cohorts that conquered the Iberian Peninsula, where there were already Jews in the seaports. A kingdom in Yemen converted to Judaism and Jewish merchants sailed from there and traded along the coast of East Africa (and possibly around the Cape to West Africa). When Cyrus allowed the Jews to leave Baghdad and return to Jerusalem, not all left. Otherwise, how can the continued Jewish learning in Baghdad be explained? Much later, Persian Jews (speaking and writing Judeo-Persian) from Baghdad sailed from the port of Basra, along with Arab and Persian Muslim merchants, to India and then to China.

By 1000, there were over a million Persian and Arab Muslims living in the Chinese seaports, and along with them were tens of thousands of Jews, leading to the development of at least six synagogue communities up and down the Chinese coast, as well as the community in the then capital of Kaifeng. Kaifeng is 500 kilometers east of the terminus of the Silk Road in Xi'an, reached from the seaports by passenger barge via the Grand Canal to the Yellow River and thence up the Yellow River to Kaifeng, which was then on its shore. The capital was shifted from Xi'an to Kaifeng when the Silk Road became too dangerous because China no longer could protect the route to Xi'an. Being then on the shore of the Yellow River, Kaifeng was at the terminus of the barge route from the vast rice and silk production of Jiangnan, and the international trade by sea. After the loss of



northern China, the capital was again shifted further south to Hangzhou in the Jiangnan region, which itself was a minor seaport being up a river from the coast.

I suspect the six synagogue communities in the seaports were larger and more vibrant than the one in Kaifeng, given that they were in continual communication with Jews and Judaism in Baghdad and elsewhere, and new Jewish mariners and merchants would have been constantly arriving. It is most unfortunate that we know nothing about them, because the port cities were depopulated by the late Ming government before Ricci and the Jesuits established themselves in China and documented the Kaifeng community for the European world.

It should be noted that, although there is evidence for Jewish merchants traveling through oasis communities along the Silk Road before its temporary demise by the 10th century and Jews were heavily involved in the earlier caravan trade, there is no evidence for a Jewish community at the terminus of the Silk Road in Xi'an. (Marco Polo went to China by land centuries later when the caravan route was reinvigorated under the Mongols, but when he found out that he could return by sea, he jumped at the opportunity.) This is why Jewish navigators and pilots were hired to navigate Portuguese, Spanish and English ships and captain Dutch vessels: they knew the routes, having been to East Africa, India and China, and many spoke European languages so they could communicate with the officers and crew.

It seems everywhere Jewish maritime merchants went, they set up trading posts leaving behind young, single male Jews as factors. These Jews married local women, perhaps daughters of their local trading partners; hence, the black Lemba in South Africa, South Asia-looking Jews in India, Iberian-looking Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, Chinese-looking Jews in China, Slavic-looking Jews in north-eastern Europe, etc. Accordingly, the Chinese Jews are no more or less Jewish than the Ashkenazi Jews, who tend to reject the Chinese Jews as Jews because they do not look "Jewish", meaning for them Slavic not Semitic (Arab) in appearance. Increased recognition of the importance of the sea in Jewish history might ameliorate the frequent dismissal by (Ashkenazi) Jews of Chinese Jews—as well as other Jews who do not look Slavic—as Jews.

#### Notes

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## The Sugihara Museum in Yaotsu, Japan

By Amanda Borschel-Dan

Excerpted from *The Times of Israel*, 3 January, 2018

GIFU PREFECTURE, Japan — It is not easy to visit Yaotsu. There is no real public transportation, nor is there English-language signage pointing to the mountainous town of 11,000 in the land-locked Gifu Prefecture. Bordered by the Hida River to the north and the Kiso River to the south, the town is sleepy and best known for its small sake industry — and Chiune Sugihara.

Hailed as a native son in Yaotsu, Sugihara, Japan's World War II ambassador to Lithuania, is credited with saving the lives of some 10,000 Jewish refugees in 1940. Sugihara helped the Jews flee war-torn Europe prior to the Final Solution through a complex arrangement of mocked-up visas to Holland's Caribbean Curacao Island, which did not actually require them, but whose bearers could be issued transit visas to Japan. That meant Soviet Russia would allow them passage via the Trans-Siberian Railroad to the Vladivostok port.

For his deeds in securing a ticket out for these thousands of Jews, Israel bestowed upon Sugihara the honor of Righteous Among the Nations in 1984. Here in backwater, rural Japan, things moved more slowly and he was largely unheralded during his life. Today, however, Sugihara is the main event in Yaotsu.

The day before our trip to isolated Yaotsu, we paid a formal, televised visit to Gifu Governor Hajime Furuta, who explained that the town hosts an annual day in memorial of Sugihara's death. His life is dramatized in school plays — and even an opera. In many ways, Yaotsu has become a one-stop shop for the now-honored diplomat. It even has its own Sugihara-branded sake.

Four years after Sugihara's death in 1986, Yaotsu town "announced its 'City Commitment to Peace' declaration on February 2, 1990, and set up the Chiune Sugihara Memorial Fund in light of Chiune Sugihara's humanitarian achievements," according to the memorial museum's website...In 1994, 40,000 square meters (430,556 square feet) of beautifully cultivated grounds were demarcated as The Hill of Humanity Park. In 2000, the striking two-floor cedar wood Chiune Sugihara Memorial Hall was constructed. Built without nails using an ancient Japanese technique, its design is intentionally reminiscent of the ships that transported the Jews to safety.

After arriving as part of a delegation of six Jewish journalists, we make our way to the hall, soaking up some rare autumn sunshine and the park's luscious seasonal colors. At the entrance to Chiune Sugihara Memorial Hall, we are effusively greeted by director Daisaku Kunieda. He's a political appointee, but his unkempt hair and beige jacket give him the air of an absent-minded professor.

This Holocaust education center in the middle of nowhere, director Kunieda says, sees 40,000 visitors annually — some 2,000 of them Israeli. That explains why the museum's informative display panels are written in Japanese, English and Hebrew. As the Holocaust is but a footnote in World War II history classes in Japan, the panels give the less-knowledgeable Japanese visitor some quick pre-World War II context and a primer to the mass genocide of the Jews.

"We provide an opportunity for visitors to understand what happened in the past, think about reality, and what can be done in the future," says Kunieda. But that's only part of its point, according to the museum director. "Learning about Sugihara's deeds provides an opportunity for people to see what they would do for themselves," says Kunieda.

"Twenty years ago, the young people said, 'Sugihara didn't follow the Japanese government's orders.' That gives a bad impression. Now, nobody says such a thing. The generation is changing, and along with it the idea of how humanity and human rights shape a society is growing," he says...

### Was Sugihara really born in Yaotsu?

...Among other arguably inaccurate facts of Sugihara's life presented at the museum, its claim of Yaotsu as Sugihara's birthplace — the town's claim to fame — is highly controversial.

Youngest son Nobuki Sugihara claims he has found documentation that proves his father was born in Kozuchi. Now Mino City, it is approximately 30 kilometers (19 miles) from Yaotsu. To this day, however, the museum's website states in large font, "Chiune was born in Yaotsu-cho"...

His allegations that Yaotsu is not Sugihara's birthplace are confirmed by Boston University Prof. Hillel Levine, the author of the 1996 "In Search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked his Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews From the Holocaust." In conversation with *The Times of Israel*, Levine says that after the death of one of Nobuki Sugihara's brothers, he "realized that his older brother had run an auction for validating the claims of towns that wanted to get money for tourism" based on the Sugihara legacy. Yaotsu, apparently, was the highest bidder according to this theory.

The familial mudslinging, which now includes the next generation, has led to the rise of splinter Sugihara not-for-profit groups, each one attempting to issue the "authorized" Sugihara history.

### It's About the Man

...Looking at the thought-provoking sculpture and memorials in the park, it's not at all clear the money went into crooked pockets. What is clear is the domestic educational significance of this place for Japan.

A group of Israeli women — many whose extended family were murdered in the Holocaust — arrives in a loud bustle to the small

museum. Their presence is instantly felt as they give their vocal approval to the museum and its message...

Many of the women avow that this visit to the Sugihara memorial is very meaningful. Their charismatic Israeli tour director, Dorit Gabay, for her part, says she brings her groups to the Yaotsu museum "to comment on the man, not just the place."

While it may be impossible to verify how many Jews Chiune Sugihara saved from the Nazi, and how much courage it required for him to intervene on their behalf, nobody is questioning the righteousness and the significance of his actions.

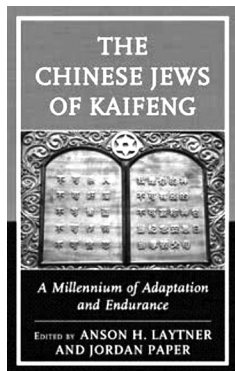
It is time for a scrupulously accurate history to be written to clear up the controversies swirling around the Japanese narrative of his heroism.

But watching the Israeli women walk through the museum, constantly remarking on its moving exhibits, one can also ask: Should whether or not the town was Sugihara's birthplace back in 1900 outweigh contemporary efforts to disseminate a good man's legacy?

[Visit the museum's website at <http://www.sugihara-museum.jp> and click at upper right corner for English text.]

Amanda Borschel-Dan is Jewish World and Archaeology editor at The Times of Israel.

## BOOK NOOK



### The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng: A Millennium of Adaptation and Endurance

Anson H. Laytner and Jordan Paper, editors of compilation. Lanham: Lexington Books. 2017. vii. 270 pp. Hardcover. ISBN 9781498550260

Reviewed by René Goldman

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The volume reviewed here is the latest English language compilation of studies on the subject of the Chinese Jews to have been published over a period of three quarters of a century. The monumental three-volume compilation Chinese Jews by the Canadian Anglican bishop of Kaifeng William C. White, published in Toronto in 1942, stands out as the first of its kind. A subsequent anthology that stands out is Jonathan Goldstein's two-volume *The Jews of China*. In addition to these collections of

scholarly articles, comprehensive, multilingual bibliographies were produced, authored by Rudolf Loewenthal, Michael Pollack and, most complete of all: Donald D. Leslie's *Jews and Judaism in Traditional China: A Comprehensive Bibliography*.

Any study of the Jewish presence in China would need to take into consideration the historical existence of the two kinds of Jewish presence in China: 1. That of Chinese Jews properly speaking, of whom a uniquely ancient community survives in the city of Kaifeng in Henan province. These bear Chinese surnames, are fully Chinese in culture, yet retain a Jewish identity in the sense that some of them call themselves Chinese Jews, while others regard themselves as Chinese with Jewish ancestry. 2. Jews in China. This category includes descendants of Mizrahi Jews from Iraq and India, who settled in Shanghai in mid-nineteenth century in the wake of British colonial expansion; Ashkenazi Jews, a major part of whom fled the pogroms of Russia and who settled in Harbin, Shanghai, and Tianjin; and Jewish refugees mainly from Germany and Austria fleeing from the Holocaust.

The first two chapters delve into the origins of the Jewish presence in China: Nigel Thomas investigates the early commercial activities of Jewish merchants traveling the Silk Road of the Steppes, while Erick Zurcher traces a historical overview of eight centuries of the Chinese diaspora. In the Tang and Northern Sung periods there existed Jewish communities in six or seven Southern port cities, of which scarcely a trace remains other than mentions of contacts between them and their Kaifeng brethren.

A fortuitous encounter between Matteo Ricci, founder of the Jesuit mission in Beijing in 1605, and Ai Tian, a Chinese-Jewish candidate to the examinations for the mandarin arrived from Kaifeng, revealed to Europe the existence of this remote, isolated community. In the following century this community received the visit of several Jesuits. It had by then briefly recovered from the devastation inflicted in the 1640s by the rebel Li Zicheng, a flood of the Yellow River, and then the Manchu invasion and founding of the Qing dynasty. Among the leading figures of the community at that time were two outstanding brothers, both mandarin recipients of the jinshi or highest degree, both learned in Hebrew and in Chinese: Zhao Yingdou, who authored a guide to the moral precepts of Judaism entitled "Preface to the Illustrious Way", and Zhao Yingchen, whose book "Vicissitudes of the Holy Scriptures" gave an account of the destruction of the city and the synagogue, and of their reconstruction and the repairing of the Torah scrolls saved from the flood, under his guidance. Alas, neither book survived the disintegration of the community and of its religious life in the nineteenth century. The Kaifeng Jews left no written documents other than four historical inscriptions engraved on stone stelae, a memorial book, and a few inscriptions from the synagogue.

Moshe Bernstein devotes an admirable chapter to Zhao Yingchen and proposes that his

Hebrew name Moshe was richly deserved, for like the Biblical Moshe who led his people to the Promised Land, Moshe Zhao repatriated the Jewish survivors of the calamities that befell Kaifeng to their hometown. Unlike Moses who died a venerated elder on Mount Nebo, Moshe Zhao led in reconstruction, but resigned from his mandarin post to return home to mourn either his father or mother, as Confucian law demanded, and died, with the title Grand Adviser, at the young age of 38.

In mid-twentieth century one might have been tempted to assume that Bishop White's collection of scholarly studies and accounts of European and American visitors to Kaifeng was the final word on the subject. Such turned out to be far from the case. On the contrary: the second half of the century witnessed a still unabated surge of analytical and informative writings, most of them articles appearing in a range of academic journals, notably *Points East*, also several books, among which stands out Donald D. Leslie's landmark work *The Survival of the Chinese Jews*. To this cornucopia of riches, Chinese scholars have made their own appreciable contributions.

One is almost tempted to aver that in the annals of scholarly publications never has so much been written about so few, especially when one contrasts the minuscule Jewish presence in Chinese history with the considerable size of China's Moslem population. The latter be they Hui, Han, or Uighurs, Uzbeks, etc., number in the millions, whereas the Jews can be counted in the hundreds and never amounted to more than a few thousands, if one includes the non-Chinese "Jews in China". Considering that Jewish merchants reached China along both the land and maritime Silk Routes, often in tandem with their Arab and Persian peers, during the Tang and Northern Sung periods; that they established communities and built houses of prayer in the same cities, perhaps to be regretted is the absence in this book of a thematic chapter focused on the relationships between the two communities, particularly in Kaifeng where some Jews converted to Islam, Jewish religious leaders were called "manla" (mullah), and ordinary Han Chinese called the Jews "Lan-mao Huizi" (Blue-capped Moslems).

Jordan Paper's chapter on the Jewishness of the Chinese Jewish magistrates, which complements Moshe Bernstein's chapter on Zhao Yingchen, contains a few reflections on that subject. An authority on the theology of the Chinese Jews, Paper learned that, among aspects of their acculturation, Moslem magistrates did, like their Chinese peers, pay homage to Confucius and their ancestors, and made offerings in the Confucian temple and the "city god" temple. They thus discharged their obligations as priests of the official cult, without ceasing to be devoted to their own religion. There is reason to assume that Jewish magistrates followed the Moslem example, similarly adjusting observance of the Halakhah to the requirements of their official status. These considerations presented Paper with a conundrum, as he admits.

It is to this process of acculturation of the Kai-

feng Jews that several of the chapter authors devote their scholarly investigations. Besides Jordan Paper, notable in this regard are Irene Eber, Andrew H. Plaks, and Mathew Eckstein. Irene Eber's chapter is entitled "Kaifeng Jews Revisited: Sinitification as Affirmation of Identity". She reveals the fact that the Kaifeng Jews owe the retention of their identity, even after they lost knowledge of Hebrew and of the Jewish religion, to the fact that they adopted the Chinese family and lineage system, becoming in the process a Chinese popular religious sect of a syncretic nature: a "jiao", one among a number of these. The syncretism of the Jews was one of Judaism with Confucianism. Syncretism allowed the Jews to become Chinese without ceasing to be Jews. The stela inscriptions name the sect Yicileye Jiao: "the Teaching of Israel". To the local Chinese the Jews were commonly known as Tiao Jin Jiao: "the Sect that Plucks the Sinew", or Jiao Jing Jiao: "the Sect that Teaches Scriptures". Perhaps also missing in this book would be a contribution by Rabbi Chaim Simons, an authority on Jewish religious observance by the Kaifeng Jews (Jewish Religious Observance by the Jews of Kaifeng China).

In Part II of this book (The Present), Mathew A. Eckstein in his "Identity Discourse" chapter draws a problematic distinction between acculturation and assimilation. He argues that the Kaifeng Jews are "profoundly acculturated" and not "fully assimilated"; that, according to Halakhah none of them can be properly labeled Jewish. Yet, we witness in modern times a subtle change in what the Kaifeng Jews call themselves. On their identity papers they register themselves as "Youtai" (Judeus), an appellation of European origin, rather than the traditional "Yicileye" (Israelite). This they do in defiance of the authorities, who insist on identifying them as Han Chinese, instead of an ethnic minority.

Andrew H. Plaks' chapter "The Confucianization of the Chinese Jews" is a masterful analysis of the parallels that the Chinese Jews conceived of in their stone inscriptions between Judaism and the Neo-Confucianism of Late Imperial China, rather than "pure" Confucianism. Among these parallels stand out such Neo-Confucian scriptural concepts as: "taiji", the primal, uncorporeal, ubiquitous unity; "Tian", Heaven, in lieu of God; Dao, the Way, the Torah. Plaks also wisely reckons that Jewish reverence for the forefathers, including patriarchs and prophets, allowed for the grafting of the Confucian "ancestor worship" onto Judaism, since neither reverence constituted idol worship. Biblical figures, other than Moses, to appear on the stone stela include Adam, Noah, and Abraham, the first two being rather unfelicitously conjoined with such Chinese mythical figures like Ban Gu and Nuwa. Such interweaving of mythical figures illustrates the adaptation of Judaism to Chinese traditions. In addition, Donald Leslie's chapter of investigation of the Old Testament and Biblical figures in Chinese sources in Sung and Ming times points to a degree of Moslem influence on the naming of Biblical figures. Leslie further speculates on the possibility of finding sources containing Chinese renderings of Allah.

In a chapter on early interactions of Western Jews with Kaifeng Jews, Alex Bender highlights the organizational efforts expended by Western Jews to counter the attempts of Protestant missionaries to convert the Chinese Jews, who by the late nineteenth century had lost their religious bearings and fallen into such a degree of poverty that they resorted to selling the Torah scrolls of their vanished synagogue. Inspired by the solidarity example of France's Alliance Israelite Universelle towards the Jews of the Middle East, leading Jewish residents of Shanghai founded a Society for the Rescue of the Chinese Jews and towards that objective raised funds to bring some of their brethren to Shanghai to teach them, rebuild the synagogue in Kaifeng, and revive Judaism in that city. To counter the threatened extinction of Chinese Judaism and Christian missionary activity was rendered difficult, however, by the necessity to focus fund raising in Europe on the rescue of Jews fleeing the pogroms of Russia and Romania. In my opinion that challenging context in which the Rescue Society was called to work could have been substantiated more amply by linking the rise of world-wide Jewish solidarity with the new threat of modern anti-Semitism, a racist form of Judeophobia, propagated by Wilhelm Marr, Eugen Dühring, Edouard Drumont, and their ilk, dramatically stirred up by the Dreyfus trial in France.

A different perspective on Kaifeng Jewry, curious in that it reflects the official ideology, can be seen in the article authored by Kaifeng scholar Kong Xianyi on Chinese pioneers of Judaic studies Chen Yuan and Shi Jingxun. He calls the latter "a patriotic scholar", who vibrantly protested at the sale of the synagogue site and Torah scrolls to the "imperialist" Bishop White and frustrated the latter's attempts to remove the historical stela from China.

Another chapter that strikes a divergent tone is an essay by Arab scholar Mohammed Turki al-Sudairi, who argues that Kaifeng Jews have been manipulated by right-wing Zionists and their Christian allies in the service of Israel's "settler-colonialism". Towards that objective they have been placed, along with such tribes as India's Bnei Menashe or Africa's Abuyudaya, in the category of "Lost Jews", in order to entice them to make aliyah; that is emigrate to Israel, be converted in accordance with Halakhah by Ashkenazi rabbis and populate the settlements.

Rounding up this broad panorama of the endurance of the Jewish presence in Kaifeng is editor Anson H. Laytner's own chapter "Between Survival and Revival: The Impact of Western Jewish Interaction on Kaifeng-Jewish Identity", which summarizes and, in some cases, amplifies on issues raised by other contributors to this enlightening book. Rabbi Laytner begins with the observation that, having survived a long series of challenges, the Kaifeng Jewish community emerged in the early 21st century on the brink of a communal revival. Will that revival truly materialize is the central question that the reader is left at the end of his chapter to ponder. The hopeful developments subsequent to the reopening of China to the world in the

wake of Deng Xiaoping's accession to power were not characterized by smooth sailing and have even run into roadblocks since 2015. Two Jewish schools were founded to teach Hebrew and Judaism, the first by one Timothy Lerner, a "Messianic Jew" suspected of Christian missionizing, and the other, genuine, by Eric Rothberg with the support of the Sino-Judaic Institute, of which Rabbi Laytner was for many years the president. Some young Kaifeng Jews are studying in Israel and a few of them made aliyah and were converted by orthodox rabbis.

The Jewish revival in Kaifeng is to no small extent jeopardized by the identity issue. The Chinese government still refuses to recognize the Chinese Jews as one of the national minorities of China: it insists that they are Han Chinese and the Israeli embassy in Beijing fully concurs with that position, as does the orthodox religious organization Chabad. Religious proselytizing is still an offence in Chinese law. A further difficulty is the rise of a factionalism that supercedes loyalty to lineage. And then there are the indiscretions committed by some members of the community, such as that of the student who applied for asylum in the United States, which have antagonized the authorities. The detailed analyses and conclusions of Rabbi Laytner perfect our understanding of the situation and are truly enlightening.

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## The International Medical Relief Corps in Wartime China

1937–1945, by Robert Mamlok. McFarland Books, 249 pages, \$45 paperback, \$29.95 Kindle.

Every page of this scholarly book is chock full of information: people, places, political ramifications, wartime struggles, and all the upheavals of history in a volatile setting. The narrative follows the perilous course taken by physicians of the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps as told by the son of one of these physicians. The time frame begins before and during World War II with the Nazi restrictions on the rights of Jewish doctors, continues through the Fascism of the Spanish Civil War, and then moves into helping the Chinese in their struggles not only against Japan and but also within their own rival factions: the nationalists and the communists. It is a gripping, detailed, heavily researched and illustrated story, well worth the telling.

Mission Hospitals, the contributions of the Rockefeller Foundation, The League of Nations' Anti-Epidemic Units, the International Red Cross Committee for Central China, United China Relief and the Society of Friends Ambulance Units were just some of the building blocks en route to aiding the embryonic state of modern health care in China. The culmination of all these efforts reached a peak with the International Medical Relief Corps.

Between 1938 and 1940, the International

Medical Relief Corps' members traveled thousands of miles by every imaginable means. From steamship to Studebaker to sampan, they came in small groups or as individuals with or without the support of friends, families or relief agencies. Along the way, they were vilified, interned, and befriended. They braved an uncertain voyage to a world they knew little about. Buoyed by an unwavering faith in anti-Fascism and an international humanitarianism without ethnic, economic or geographic borders, they did not strive to change people's faith or fame or to seek fortune.... (The) volunteers came to help.

And what did they meet on arrival? Personal story follows personal story as the doctors detailed the grim horrors of war—death, starvation, and human misery. They also sometimes met personal rivalry, often resented as foreigners by the local physicians. There was homesickness, bureaucratic red tape and the “corruption, inequality and underutilization of foreign physicians.” In addition, there were substandard facilities and critical shortages of medical supplies.

Specific, detailed chapters focus on political, cultural and medical conditions, hazardous travel to and from the battlefields and the forced restrictions on healthcare delivery. But perhaps the most important chapter is the last, dealing with what the corps accomplished; In addition to numerous lives saved, they documented approaches to the treatment of scabies and syphilis, surgical improvisations, and new management techniques to prevent infectious diseases as well as potentially catastrophic epidemics.

In August 2015, author Robert Mamlok, whose father, Dr. Erich Mamlok, had been one of the 27 foreign volunteers who joined the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps in 1939, joined in the celebration of a new national holiday marking the end of the Sino-Japanese war. A monument was erected in Tuyunguan Park near Guiyang China. Guests, including Dr. Mamlok, narrated the roles their families had played in this little-known history of the Relief Corps, told stories to keep remembrance alive and to answer questions describing these physicians, what they had endured, and their legacy. This book—filled with a wealth of material and as teeming with data as is China itself—is one worthy result.

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## Jüdische Expatriates in China Und Hong Kong Nach 1976

by Alina Patru.

<https://www.degruyter.com/view/product/503792?format=EBOOK&rskey=PmBpg8>

This book in German offers the first empirically based study of the Jewish communities in China and Hong Kong after the Cultural Revolution. Many synagogues were founded and Jewish religious life became pluralized and particularized as never before, despite Chinese caution about foreign religions and his-

torical events such as the transition of Hong Kong to Chinese control. This book is also the first religious history to study expatriates under the conditions of short-term migration not directed at integration. These religious transformations demonstrate that the religious attitudes of people in foreign lands develop their own dynamic, not merely as a side effect in the process of following other goals, such as integration or the struggle to acquire official recognition. The results shine a new light on the processes of diaspora and widen classical concepts such as homeland or diasporan consciousness.

The author Alina Patru holds the chair for religious studies at the University of Sibiu, Romania and is Privatdozentin (permanent lecturer and doctoral supervisor) at the University of Hanover, Germany.

## The Library War

By Den Leventhal

1997 was a helluva year in Hong Kong. It seemed the only topic of local conversation was the forthcoming transfer of sovereignty from Britain to China. Uncertainty was rampant on every level of society. The prime question on all minds seemed to be to what degree the Beijing government would roll back the political freedoms that the British had expanded in recent years for the locals. People believed that the forthcoming governmental handover threatened the existing freedoms of speech, independent press, and voting rights. No conversation went without some mention of this concern.

I had been based in Hong Kong since 1980. However, my job took me all over the China Mainland. I was comfortable dealing with the Chinese-from ministers of state to factory workers. I felt that the political change would not affect the lives of the many resident expatriate businessmen.

In January, however, I received some bad news. After returning from a business trip to Beijing and Shanghai, I learned that a small sore on my gum proved to be cancerous. Following surgical removal of a chunk of my jaw bone, I went back to work. From February through September, I made ten more working trips to various places on the China Mainland. Then the open sore reappeared near the same location as the first one. My local surgeon recommended I go to a major cancer treatment center in the States.

Fortunately, a team of incredible doctors at the Massachusetts Ear and Eye Infirmary in Boston cared for me. During a fourteen hours long surgical procedure, they removed the left half of my jaw, and replaced it with a slice off the top of my left ileac crest. A lengthy course of radiation followed...

This was tough on my family. A little earlier, my wife had accepted a position at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. This meant we would move into University housing. After escorting me to Boston, and enduring the agony of seeing me though the operation and recovery, she

flew back across a continent and an ocean to manage our move and start her new job. Our daughter, Dana Marett, quit her job in New York so that she could be with me through the radiation treatments and physical therapy work. That finished, Mary returned to escort me back to our new apartment in Hong Kong's New Territories.

Working for a great company, Liberty Mutual, I was told to take my time with recuperation. They even set up communication facilities in our home so that I could stay “in the loop” with all our activities in China.

As well can be imagined, the process was rather depressing for me. Being totally invested in our program for getting the company established in China, I was not happy about the restrictions ordered by my medicos and dictated by my physical condition. Sequestered at home for an extended period of rest, I got out only for physical therapy sessions. I felt I had lost control over my own life. Then I learned that a small, but very special institution was under threat of being destroyed.

Back in 1984, Mary and I, along with a few other like-minded members of the Jewish Community Center of Hong Kong (JCC), founded the Jewish Historical Society of Hong Kong. We decided that our first order of business was to create a Judaica Library in the JCC. We convinced JCC leadership to grant us space to put up shelves. We donated funds to get started and then circulated, tin cups in hand, amongst the JCC's membership. The support was heartwarming, and encouraged us in our project.

Over time, our efforts were rewarded with a dedicated library room in a new and greatly expanded club facility. Even better, the library became a line item in the center's budget. We were now able to hire a full time professional librarian to manage our large and growing collection of Judaica literature. When the center added a Jewish Day School, our library became an important resource for the teachers and students.

The various congregations attached to the center, i.e., Orthodox, Conservative and Reform, accessed our collection of Judaic literature. Jewish study materials, and works by Jewish authors. All seemed to enjoy this plethora of resources. Only once did we have a spot of trouble. A Lubavitch rabbi threw our copy of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* into a trash can. Our librarian salvaged it, saving our eclectic range of Jewish authors.

On another occasion, a controversy started about whether or not the flying buttresses on our synagogue were part of the original architecture. This became a major community concern because of our Trustees' plans to restore the building to its original appearance. Ohel Leah Synagogue was built in 1901-02. Many argued that the buttresses were added in the 1930s.

However, no one had any documentary support for their respective positions in the debate. Our library staff went to work. They resolved the dispute by discovering a copy of a maga-

zine published in London in 1902. The photograph clearly showed the flying buttresses.

The founders evolved into the library's management team. We were very pleased with ourselves. We had created the only dedicated and professionally managed Judaica Library on the great circle extending from Los Angeles, across the Pacific Ocean and the Asian continent, to Jerusalem. All recommendations for collection expansion were accepted to the extent that our finances allowed. Book donations poured in. Visiting scholars stopped by with complimentary comments about our achievement. Local universities and colleges requested access for research purposes. Our archived historical materials supported research leading to publications by our Jewish Historical Society of Hong Kong.

You can probably understand my upset at learning that the newly elected chairman of the community center began her term of office by declaring that the library would be closed. Her stated objective was to convert the space into a chairman's office! Upset? Fury would be a better description of my reaction to this news.

Our new chairman was the wife of a Chief Justice in Hong Kong's court system. She was a British barrister, with the stereotypical mannerisms of an upper class British colonial sahib. Her self-assurance was impregnable. Many feared her displeasure. The voices of opposition were rather weak. Our librarian was worried about losing her job. In my weakened state, my appeal to our club boss lady made no impact. I was brushed off.

I found her views to be inconceivable. Life long learning is a Jewish cultural imperative. We are the "People of the Book." Throughout two thousand years of the Diaspora, education has been our salvation. Destroy a library?! Outrageous!

I then made a decision. This was war.

This new-fangled Internet was my primary tactical weapon. As a cloistered warrior with this powerful communications tool, I started a worldwide search for allies. In my determination to save our library, I located and enlisted leading scholars in the Jewish Studies departments of major universities on every continent. Obtaining a copy of the mailing list for an association of Jewish librarians, I contacted them also. Sounding the tocsin, I discovered almost all of them agreed to write letters of protest to the JCC's Board of Trustees. The Trustees were a critical target because of their responsibility for finance and operations policies for our community center. Several of my allies wrote articles for Jewish journals and newsletters to raise an army of supporters.

The response was overwhelming. A huge volume of letters of protest swamped the Trustees and our new JCC chairman. Many of them were signed by world-renowned scholars. The Trustees then stepped in and put a stop to our chairman's plan. Our library was saved!

Throughout the battle, I rarely stepped outside our apartment. However, my intense focus on

saving our library made my recuperation and rehabilitation process a mere side show—a minor irritation. Depression gone, I went back to my professional work with uplifted spirit.

Bashing about the Mainland as a corporate road warrior—as a front line soldier carrying out America's policy of "engagement" with China was the norm again.

As for our chairman, from that time on, she couldn't look at me without steam coming out her ears. On the other hand, her husband, the Chief Justice always bought me a drink whenever I stopped into the club's restaurant for a snack. He never mentioned the Library War, but I often saw him reading comfortably in our library.

*Den Leventhal served for many years on the SJI Board and chaired its grant-giving program. He is the author of How to Leap a Great Wall in China, The China Adventures of a Cross-Cultural Trouble-Shooter (Merwin, Asia: 2014). He may be reached at leventhal@md.net.*

## In Myanmar, a Jewish Community Survives

By Charles Dunst

Excerpted from the *Times of Israel*, www.time-sofIsrael.com, 14 January 2019

YANGON, Myanmar (JTA) – There was a Hanukkah party last month in this capital city and enough guests — over 200 — to surprise an uninvited tourist.

"There are no Jews here anymore," the tourist proclaims, confused about the celebration at Yangon's regal Chatrium Hotel.

"Yes there are," replies Ari Solomon, a guest from Australia.

"No, they said there are 10 families," the tourist responds.

"Well, that's not nothing — that's 10 families," Solomon counters. "That's a lot. You go back to my hometown, Calcutta, and there are lucky to be 16 Jews, let alone 10 families."

Indeed, Myanmar's Jewish community has dwindled to about 20 people. Most of the Jews had fled when Japan invaded the country in World War II, as the Axis power distrusted them for their perceived political alignment with the British. The majority who remained left in the mid-1960s, when the new regime nationalized businesses as part of a socialist agenda that would soon run the country into the ground.

Still, Sammy Samuels, 38, the de facto leader of this Southeast Asian nation's remaining Jewish community, has held out hope for its future, if not a revival. In recent years his father, Moses, had maintained the community, opening the door of Yangon's sole synagogue daily in the hopes of welcoming tourists.

Following his father's death in 2015, Samuels

has taken over, embracing social media and tourism to keep the community alive... "[Everyone] thinks that we're a small community [and that there's] nothing going on," Samuels says at the December 7 Hanukkah celebration. "But we have this kind of event, the government people come — the embassy, friends and family, too."

The Jewish community here grew rapidly from the mid-1800s through 1942. At its peak, 3,000 Jews called Myanmar home when it was still known as Burma. Some rose to local power, like David Sofaer, who in the 1930s served as the mayor of Yangon, then known as Rangoon. Myanmar at the time was still a component of the British Empire...

"My great-grandfather came to Rangoon around the mid-19th century," Samuels tells JTA in an interview. A Jewish community — Orwell's "gangs" — soon began to flourish, with many, like the Samuels family, coming from Baghdad, Iraq, in search of economic prosperity.

Today, the 19th century Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue in Yangon sits solitary in this land of golden pagodas and remains wholly unguarded in the city's main Muslim neighborhood...

"Five buildings away, we have a mosque. And then right in front of us is the Buddhist temple," Samuels says. "What a combination."

Samuels credits this respect across Myanmar's ethnic and religious groups as directly tied to Israel. Joe Freeman explains in *Tablet* magazine that Burma was Israel's "first friend" in Asia, as both countries secured independence from the British in 1948. Burma's first prime minister, U Nu, had a "soft spot for Israel" and was close with David Ben-Gurion, his Israeli counterpart. U Nu was the first prime minister of any country to visit the Jewish state.

"The Burmese population, if you tell them 'Judaism' they don't know [what it is], but if you say 'Israel,' they feel like Israel is a religion," Samuels says. "They fully respect Israel."

But Yangon's religious diversity, which has long bestowed Jews with safety, is not reflective of Myanmar at large. The majority of the country remains off limits for tourists due to raging ethnic conflicts; Jews historically lived mostly in Yangon and Mandalay.

In 2016, the Myanmar military ramped up its long-running persecution of the Rohingya Muslims, whom most Burmese regard as outsiders and some as terrorists... Some 1.1 million Rohingya have fled Myanmar; thousands are believed to have been killed in what a United Nations investigator called an ongoing genocide...

Samuels, perhaps due to his Western education and Jewish understanding of the horrors of ethnic scapegoating, speaks more empathetically about the Rohingya. He even uses the word "Rohingya," although the Israeli government, in line with Myanmar's government's preference, refuses to do the same.

Israel allowed its arms firms to sell weapons to Myanmar's military through the fall of 2017. During an interview, Ronen Gilor, the Israeli ambassador to Myanmar, declines to comment

on this issue...

Samuels politely opts not to comment on Israel's arming of Myanmar's military as well. He does say, however, that the military's campaign has caused a decline in tourism...

Even when Myanmar was a pariah state, Moses Samuels had long helped Jewish tourists interested in visiting the country, answering their queries regarding accommodations, flights and restaurants. Father and son eventually turned it into a business: Myanmar Shalom Travel and Tours.

"Thank God, since 2011, the country start[ed] changing unbelievably" and business began "booming," the younger Samuels says.

This increased business corresponded with a series of political, economic and administrative reforms pursued by Myanmar's military junta. The junta even released from house arrest Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel Prize-winning human rights advocate who spent nearly 15 years in some form of imprisonment and now runs the country's civilian government. (She has since drawn criticism for her unwillingness to stand up for the Rohingya, although she has no control over the military.) A photo of Sammy Samuels and his family with Suu Kyi remains part of a photo display outside the synagogue.

Samuels says that since 2011, social media has played a key role in strengthening his community.

"We have a WhatsApp group, 'Yangon Jews,'" he says...And beyond social media, Samuels praises the Israeli Embassy for contributing to Yangon's Jewish community.

"The Israeli Embassy and us – I would even say it's a family," he says.

Gilor echoed those thoughts in an interview.

"It's a very good thing to have collaboration with Sammy and the Jewish community," the ambassador tells JTA, calling the community "a bridge" among Myanmar, Israel and the Jewish world.

Gilor is among the Hanukkah celebration's VIP guests, as is Phyo Min Thein, the chief minister of Yangon. Other leaders, including those from the local interfaith dialogue and Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Baha'i, and Hindu communities, are on hand, too. Two Myanmar Shalom-organized tour groups – one of Israelis and one of Jews with familial histories in Myanmar – account for the overwhelming majority of the night's Jewry.

Solomon, the Australian guest who appeared to be in his 60s, tells JTA in an interview that his mother was born in Burma. During the Japanese invasion she fled to Kolkata, India. Solomon was born in Kolkata, formerly Calcutta, and neither his mother nor anyone from his immediate family had ever returned to Burma.

"My father forbade us from coming back because of the military junta," Solomon says. Solomon's mother is 90, so his father finally conceded – partially due to the Samuels-organized tour...

Samuels once pursued opportunities beyond Myanmar's stifled borders, attending Yeshiva University and working for the American Jewish Congress in New York City. A Jewish visitor to Yangon had helped him get into YU and obtain a full scholarship. Samuels would have been unable to obtain such an education in Myanmar, as the nation's universities were closed intermittently for years as part of a military effort to stymie repeated student revolutions.

"I could've moved to US and lived a better life," Samuels says, explaining why he returned home following his father's 2015 death. "But our main mission here is very simple: We don't want any Jewish visitor coming to this country to be a stranger."

By that measure, the Hanukkah event was a coup for Samuels.

"Things change," he says, recalling years when he celebrated the Festival of Lights

with fewer than 20 people. "A few years ago, no Burmese people knew of Hanukkah. Now the Buddhists wish me on Facebook 'happy Hanukkah Sammy!'"

And while the synagogue is ranked third on TripAdvisor among Yangon's "things to do," Samuels remains incapable of securing a minyan without assistance from tourists.

Another sign of decay is Yangon's Jewish cemetery: Unlike its counterpart in Kolkata, it is neither computerized nor indexed, Solomon complains.

In 1997, the Myanmar government announced its intentions to move the cemetery out of Yangon but never followed through. The cemetery remains hidden on a hill that some stray dogs have clearly claimed as their territory; a sign outside proclaims it to be only accessible "with permission from Myanmar Jewish Community." Samuels gives me such permission by jotting down a phrase in Burmese on a business card, which I hand to the elderly woman who guards the cemetery and appears to live on its grounds.

Modernity pokes through the cemetery's historical veneer: A TV satellite protrudes from the caretaker's home above the graves, and her young associate, who smiles and casually watches me as I wander the grounds, plays Burmese pop music from his smartphone while smoking a cigarette.

Instead of stones placed by visitors, debris largely comprising largely shattered Hebrew-lettered gravestones sits atop the few intact graves. As Samuels creates a modern community in Myanmar, the physical memory of its Burmese predecessor continues to crumble.

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