

Be'chol Lashon Update 11/1/05

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EVENTS:

The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography

September 23, 2005 - January 29, 2006

www.thejewishmuseum.org

A trailer for a documentary film entitled, **Judaism and Race** by Shari Rothfarb and Avishai Mekonen, sponsored by the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, is part of *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography* at the Jewish Museum.

Through photographs and video works by distinguished contemporary artists, *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography* explores the remarkable racial, social, and ethnic diversity of Jews in the United States today.

The Jewish Museum has commissioned ten projects from thirteen photographers and video artists who have collaborated with individuals, families, and organizations across the U.S. to create images that portray the complexity of Jewish identity today. The works of art in the exhibition raise questions about photography's ability to represent cultural identity while examining the breadth and challenges posed by the multiplicity of the American Jewish experience.

The faces of American Jews are as varied as the face of America. Thus the exhibition serves to question stereotypes, challenge traditional assumptions, and look at issues of racism and anti-Semitism in America.

The Jewish Museum, NYC
1109 Fifth Avenue at 92nd Street
New York, NY 10128

Photography Exhibit : A Journey to the Jewish Communities of Morocco & North Africa

September 22 – December 15, 2005

**1835 Ellis Street between Scott & Pierce Street, San Francisco
(415) 567-3327 ext. 703**

Jews Among Berbers: Talk & Slideshow

Thursday, November 3, 2005

7:30pm

A talk and slide show by Sarah Levin

Jewish Sacred Music from Morocco Wednesday, November 9, 2005

7:30pm

A participatory workshop with Hazzan Richard Kaplan

Hamsa & Henna

Sunday, November 13, 2005

1pm

Two North African folk arts for families

New Books & North African Cuisine

Monday, November 14, 2005

7:30pm

Food writers Joan Nathan and Matthew Goodman

What's Jewish in the Music of North Africa?

Wednesday, November 30, 2005

7:30pm

A talk and demonstration with Za'atar members John Erlich & Daniel Eshoo

ARTICLES

NEW Book: U.S. Jewish Community is Far More Diverse than Most Realize

By Joe Eskenazi

September 18, 2005

Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Look at the Jew on your left. Look at the Jew on your right. OK, now look at two more Jews. Odds are, one of you is ethnically diverse. That's the claim Gary Tobin makes in *In Every Tongue*, a new book exploring racial and ethnic diversity within America's Jewish population. The San Francisco demographer maintains that perhaps 20 percent of the nation's Jews are Sephardi, Mizrahi, racial minorities or of mixed race. "It's a big deal when you start translating it into the number of human beings," said Tobin, who co-wrote the book with his wife, Diane Tobin, and Scott Rubin. Tobin, president of the Institute for Jewish Community Research, always has been one of the most vocal critics of the massive 2001 National Jewish Population Survey, claiming it systematically undercounted West Coast Jews and Israelis. In doing so, he added, the United Jewish Communities survey missed vast numbers of ethnic Jews.

Tobin makes a conservative estimate of 200,000 Israelis in the United States, and believes as many as half of them might be all or part Sephardi or Mizrahi. He also believes many Jews of partially Sephardi heritage have been identified as solely Ashkenazi in past polls. "You add it up and it's a surprisingly huge proportion. The difference between 10 or 12 percent and 20 percent is hundreds of thousands of people. In a Jewish community of only 6 million, that's a big deal," he said. So where are these vast numbers of ethnic Jews hiding? Tobin laughs at that query, as it's the same question federations and JCCs and other Jewish organizations ask about unaffiliated Jews out there: Where are they hiding? The answer is, they aren't hiding at all.

Tobin evokes a comparison between ethnic or unaffiliated Jews and Ralph Ellison's classic novel on black life in America, *The Invisible Man*. "Nobody sees them because they operate outside the mainstream Jewish community," he said. *In Every Tongue* contains numerous interviews with mixed-race Jews, many of whom feel marginalized in both the Jewish and other ethnic communities. Tobin feels their experiences can be used to illustrate much of what needs to be improved within the Jewish community. "The vast majority of the Jews in the Bay Area don't belong to synagogue and don't contribute to the federation, so making the Jewish community more open and welcoming in general is a key question," he said.

"The Jewish community spends a lot of time trying to figure out who's not a Jew rather than spending time reinforcing people who want to live as Jews and be part of the Jewish world." Tobin sees the surprising diversity of the American Jewish community as a

strength. Certainly, it's a conversation starter in relating to other minority communities. It's also a counter to pro-Palestinian claims that Jews are a monolithic race of white colonizers. "In all of our personal interviews, we picked up a tremendous interest in what Judaism is about," he said. "As a community, we're not ready to handle that. We're still making people knock on the door three times before we talk to them. If we wanted to grow, we could grow. The qualitative data tells us there's a lot of interest out there."

U.S. Jewish Ethnic Diversity Great

Ynetnews.com
September 17, 2005

New research finds 20% of Jewish America is ethnically and racially diverse; study shows increase in diverse Jews mirrors changing racial, religious character of America

New research debunks the commonly held view that America's Jews are a monolithic people of exclusively white European ancestry. In a new book scholar Gary A. Tobin and co-authors show that American Jews are a multiracial people - perhaps the most diverse people in history. Of the nation's 6 million Jews, roughly 1.2 million, or 20 percent, consist of African-American, Asian-American, Latino, Sephardic (of Spanish and Portuguese descent), Middle Eastern, and mixed-race Jews. This minority within a minority is growing, and has the potential to change the traditional debate over the future of American Jewish life, the authors say. Prior estimates of the size of this community of Jews ranged between 10 and 14 percent.

"The Jewish people began at the intersection of Africa, Asia, and Europe. We are simply becoming who we have always been," said Diane Tobin.

The authors of "In Every Tongue" uncovered overlooked groups among the Jewish people, including:

- Latinos reclaiming their Jewish roots, 500 years after the Spanish Inquisition - who view themselves not as "converts" but as "reverts" to Judaism.
- Long-established communities of African-American Jews in many cities, such as Chicago and New York, with their own institutional structures.
- Nearly 1 million diverse Americans closely connected to Jews - spouses, children, parents, siblings - many of whom practice some Jewish customs and identify with Jewish issues.

Over a four-year period, the authors conducted over 200 personal interviews and focus groups, collected original survey data on more than 1,000 people from over 300 households in 36 states, and visited numerous communities of diverse Jews to observe and understand their institutional structures.

The authors found that some diverse Jews feel isolated from their racial and ethnic communities as well as from the Jewish community. Despite this challenge, they identify strongly with both communities. "People from a broad range of backgrounds find Judaism a comforting home, and they do not feel they have to choose between their racial, ethnic, and religious identities simply because they are part of the Jewish people," said Rabbi Rigoberto Emmanuel Vinas, a New York-based Orthodox rabbi of Cuban descent.

The research also shows that, while many people believe that genetic heritage (being born of a Jewish parent) is the only way to join the Jewish people, conversion, adoption, and intermarriage are significant ways in which people of all races become Jewish. "More than ever, people in America are crossing boundaries and redefining race and religion," said Gary Tobin. "The changing American Jewish people are a reflection of America as a whole."

The Institute for Jewish & Community Research produced the book as part of a community-building effort to help the American Jewish community and Jews around the world recognize and reach out to ethnically and racially diverse Jews.

[Featured Articles List](#)

200 Bnei Menashe in India Convert to Judaism

By Baruch Gordon
Israel National News
September 21, 2005

For the first time, some 200 Bnei Menashe living in northeastern India formally converted back to Judaism this past week by a team

of Israeli rabbis organized by the Jerusalem-based Shavei Israel. The Bnei Menashe claim descent from the tribe of Manasseh, one of the ten tribes exiled from the Land of Israel by the Assyrian empire over 2,700 years ago. Some 7,000 of them reside primarily in the two Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur, along the border with Burma and Bangladesh. Shavei Israel arranged for a team of six dayanim (rabbinical court judges) to travel to India in order to carry out the conversions with the approval of Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar. On March 30, Rabbi Amar issued an historic ruling in which he formally recognized the Bnei Menashe as "descendants of Israel" and agreed to restore them to the Jewish people.

"It was an incredibly emotional and spiritual experience," said Shavei Israel Chairman Michael Freund, who accompanied the rabbis to India. "There were men and women, young and old, many of whom had been longing to return to the Jewish people for decades, and finally their dream has come true." Each of the candidates for conversion was interviewed by a Beit Din (rabbinical court) consisting of three of the visiting rabbis, who sought to assess their level of Jewish knowledge and commitment. "The rabbis showed great sensitivity and understanding, and they were deeply impressed by the Bnei Menashe and their grasp of Jewish law and lore" said Freund. A particularly poignant moment, he said, came when 83-year old Sara Haunhar was informed by the Beit Din that she had been accepted into the Jewish people.

"She began to cry," Freund recalled, "and when one of the rabbis asked her if she was OK, Mrs. Haunhar composed herself and told them: 'All of my life, I have feared that I would die before meriting to see G-d's Holy Land. But now that you have accepted me as a Jew, I am confident that I will soon be able to set foot on the land of my ancestors, the Land of Israel.'" In recent years, over 800 Bnei Menashe have made aliyah thanks largely to Shavei Israel, which reaches out and assists "lost Jews" seeking to return to the Jewish people. But that came to a halt in 2003, when then-Israeli Interior Minister Avraham Poraz of the Shinui party decided to freeze their immigration.

After Poraz' decision was announced, Freund turned to the Chief Rabbinate, and began lobbying to receive official rabbinical recognition of the Bnei Menashe as a means of circumventing the Interior Minister's decision. The 200 Bnei Menashe converted last week all plan to move to Israel in the near future, and Freund believes that the remaining members of the community will eventually follow as well.

Freund added, "This is the breakthrough we have been waiting for, and we will do everything we can to bring this lost tribe home to Zion. G-d is gathering in His people, just as the Prophets foretold, and I am grateful to be playing my small part in this process." Shavei Israel's work is in accordance with Jewish Law and under the ongoing supervision of the Chief Rabbinate of the State of Israel.

[Featured Articles List](#)

Rocking the Cradle: A Midlife Conversion Story

By Carol Rubel
The United Synagogue Review
Fall/Winter 2005

Rock-a-bye, Baby, in the treetop
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall
And down will come Baby, cradle and all

The cradle will fall ... and fall - it did. The cradle of Roman Catholicism ? the faith into which I was baptized as an infant and participated in until adulthood - "came down" recently and catapulted me into a decision to convert to Judaism . Unlike the nursery rhyme baby who finds herself adrift and without anchor, after my decision, I found myself finally at a place in which I felt as if my "authentic self" had space to breathe, to think and to rest. My decision to convert was not made lightly - nor was it made in the glow of impending marriage. My decision to convert was not made to appease future in-laws or to please a spouse. My decision to convert was made because - finally - a confluence of abstracts had come together in an almost mystical way --- "the time" for me to claim my father's heritage had come.

As the adult daughter of an interfaith marriage, I have lived a life full of the richness of two different but intertwined traditions. Because I am in my early fifties, I was born in a time before there was a publicized "December Dilemma" for interfaith households. I was raised in a time when intermarriage was still a real oddity, a time when many Jewish partners in interfaith marriages found themselves metaphorically dead to their families and many non-Jewish partners in those marriages found themselves ostracized by both their birth families and their in-laws. But I was lucky. I was raised by parents who remained dedicated to their own religious tradition and still fostered an atmosphere of respect for the other one.

Yes, our family had a Christmas tree. Yes, my sister and I had Easter eggs. Yes, my Irish-Catholic mother, my sister, and I went to Mass on every single Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation. But we also were weaned on chicken soup and mitzvah balls. We saw our

father kiss a mezuzah upon entering and exiting our home - that was as normal to us as seeing him brushing his teeth. We kept a pasha for the General Israel Girls' Orphanage in our kitchen. We watched my father mark the marshiest of his parents. Many childhood Sunday mornings found us returning from Mass to feast on a potato cudgel that one of my father's relatives brought to share with us. Both in major ways, observing our father spending the High Holy Days in the neighborhood synagogue, and in minor ways, as we learned not to hang wash on the line on a Jewish holiday, we lived a delicate balance between the worlds of the Jewish doer and the watcher.

I think that in my secret heart, however, I was meant to be a doer. My sister was not, and that's okay. She remains a practicing Roman Catholic. Just as children born of the same parents can have different colored hair and eyes and different likes and dislikes, so, too, can they feel connections to different religious traditions. My journey from the world of the observer to the world of the participant was long. It took years of agonizing introspection, a complete upheaval of my personal comfort zone ? and the support of two men, my husband and my rabbi.

My feelings for my cradle religion were affected deeply by its theology, including although not limited to the role of women in the church. They were affected as well by the devastating scandals that have rocked it. My desire to listen to sermons about God, and about a human being's relationship to God, instead of pleas for participation in debt reduction campaigns also colored my feelings about the Catholicism that surrounded me. As I found myself sitting in church week after week, feeling agitated and unsettled instead of connected and comforted, I started to wonder why I was still going through the motions. Why was I still slipping envelopes into collection plates and dashing madly to get to weekend Mass? Just to ensure that my body was present while my eyes searched through the monthly missal to find the "Old Testament" reading for the weekend?

Finally, I stopped going to Mass. And no one was more surprised ? or bothered ? by that decision than my husband. Like my mother, I had married a Jew. My husband is funny, tall, funny, smart, funny ? and a deeply religious Conservative Jew. When he fell in love with me, I know that he was as surprised as anyone else, including his children! I am his second wife, not the biological mother of his children but the one who came along years after the dissolution of that relationship. I know that he was surprised to fall in love with me, because he had always preached to his children about the evils of intermarriage, but, as he discovered, the heart follows its own direction.

My husband had to make some painful decisions himself, including the severing, at her insistence, of the relationship with one Orthodox daughter. Then we married and set up a home where the two traditions, Catholicism and Judaism, existed side by side, just as they had in the home of my youth. We each respected the other's religious identity and observance, as my parents had. That arrangement might have lasted forever ? except for the stirrings and turbulence within my own spirit.

Even now I cannot explain how it was that I started to feel more connected to Judaism. Perhaps it began one Chanukah, when I decided to learn the blessings in Hebrew so that I could present my husband with that new skill as we lit the menorah. Or perhaps it happened the year that I convinced my husband that it was our responsibility to host a seder for his elderly relatives. But in fact I think that simply watching my husband live his daily life, unburdened by continual internal rantings against his religion, is what sealed the deal for me. I finally admitted to myself that I wanted to feel that same kind of peace that he felt, and I finally quieted myself sufficiently to listen to what my soul and my heart had been trying to tell my mind for years. They were telling me that my essence is Jewish.

Had I been allowed to choose my religion when I was a child, I do not doubt that I would have opted for my father's tradition rather than my mother's. That decision would have had nothing to do with loving one parent more than the other, or even with identifying more with the essential tenets of one faith than the other. No, I would have made that choice just because everything about Judaism always seemed to feel better to me than anything about Catholicism. I was a spiritual changeling. It took me decades to gain the confidence to correct the cosmic glitch created when I was baptized in infancy.

It was easier for me to go through the conversion process than it might have been for others. Part of that ease came from my childhood; I had grown up exposed to many of Judaism's concepts, traditions, and practices. But I think that for most people who are brave enough to attempt something as radical as conversion, the hardest challenge is the need to find support strong enough to make that change seem possible. For me, that support came from two places. First, there was my husband. As soon as he heard about my intention, he was overjoyed.

Never once during our marriage had he asked me to convert, or even to consider conversion. But his delight in my decision to convert was palpable. My journey's main planner, however, was not my husband. It was not even me. The man into whose hands I placed my complete trust was my husband's rabbi, Joseph Mendelsohn, who had just accepted the pulpit at Temple Israel, a United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism-affiliated synagogue in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Maybe it was because he was new that he was so receptive to me. Maybe his willingness to listen to my story and his respect for my family convinced me that he could help me navigate through this new experience.

Rabbi Joe provided me with a series of lessons that helped me understand the why behind the what. In other words, his enthusiastic teaching helped me place the traditions, practices, and rituals I had seen and participated in throughout my life in a rich, meaningful context. His philosophy held that the conversion was not just the ceremony that marked the process's end - although his insistence of the traditional mikvah and bet din was unswerving. Still, for him conversion was the process itself, the process through which he guided as weeks turned into months and the seasons kept changing. To Rabbi Joe, conversion's culminating ceremony is "the punctuation mark at the end of the sentence."

Although I was sure that the step I was taking was the right one for me, I found the days just before the ceremony to be difficult. I could not sleep. I had an almost constant headache. My back ached. My temper was shorter than usual and my emotions were even closer to the surface than they normally are. I was a wreck. My husband's even-tempered responses to the chaos around him, and his silent effort to give me as much room as possible, manifested themselves in a thousand ways. Although I was unable to acknowledge his kindness then, I will never forget it.

Finally the day came, and I found that the feelings I had that day were similar to those I had felt on my wedding day. More than anything, I wanted to be by myself. I wanted not simply to prepare physically for the experience, but to still myself and to listen to God's voice, as I had when I made my initial decision. And I did. The hours I spent getting ready to meet my husband, Rabbi Joe, and the other members of the bet din were hours I would not have traded for the world. The reflection and contemplation steadied me and supported me as I made the drive into town. Rabbi Joe's approach to the conversion ceremony inverted the traditional order. He asked me to visit the mikvah before meeting with the bet din. He felt that it was important for me to make the physical step before I asked that the legal one be certified.

Walking across the street from the synagogue to the mikvah, accompanied by my husband and the three men who made up the bet din, felt almost surreal. My companions tried to make the journey an easy one. Each one said something lighthearted and comforting. Hearing them talk outside the small room in which I made my final preparations provided a sensory anchor for the experience. Walking into the actual mikvah room and completing the immersion rite was an experience unlike anything else I have ever done. Every fear I had evaporated, and I felt confident and strong as I recited the ancient Hebrew blessings. I felt more and more as if I were getting closer to where I wanted to be. Each chorus of "amen" from the waiting, listening men outside the room strengthened the sensory anchor and urged me forward through the next step.

After the mikvah we walked back into the rabbi's study, where what he called the conversation began. It was friendly, focusing on my story and my intentions instead of attempting to find minutiae from law and history with which to confound me. After a very long time, the pronouncement came. "We're ready to sign!" Each man's signature confirmed that I was now in my spiritual home. My husband was invited into the room then, and all four men stood and sang a song of congratulation and joy to me. How could I not feel loved, respected and honored in the midst of that?

The last part of the ceremony included only Rabbi Joe, my husband, and me. We walked into the sanctuary so that the Aron Kodesh could be opened for me and so that I could make my personal declaration of faith. So there, before God, anchored by the love of my life on one side and the architect of my journey on the other, I became - fully, finally, and forever ? part of the people of Israel, part of the family into which I had been born but not raised. My home town is far from Oz, but Dorothy's words could not be more appropriate for me. "There's no place like home," she said. It took me a long time to find this home, this Jewish spiritual home, but the journey was worth the effort.

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Rabbi Meets a Different Kind of Need on Campus: Conversions

By Alexandra J. Wall
J. The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California
Friday September 23, 2005

Spiritual leaders at Hillel are the jack of all rabbis — leading services, teaching Jewish classes and catering to the religious needs of the students. Rabbi Mychal Copeland has been doing all of that in her two years at Hillel of Stanford University, plus a bit more. So far, Copeland has overseen the conversions of four Stanford students, and she's currently teaching her second class of potential converts. "When I came here, I started to work with a couple students who were thinking about conversion," she said. "And then there were a couple more, and we had enough to make a class. I realized they would be better served to study the issues together, and have community and be able to talk about what's best for them."

Copeland said there is a general hesitation among her Hillel colleagues in talking about conversion with students because it might be seen as proselytizing, especially when it comes to undergraduates. But the women — all have been women, so far — who have converted with Copeland are graduate students. Some of them married Israelis or Jewish men. And some came to it on their own. Whatever their motivations, Copeland said the students appreciate having a conversion class right on campus, where they already feel at home, as opposed to having to journey into synagogues where they know no one, to find a rabbi they haven't met. And probably a lot of that has to do with the welcoming attitude of the rabbi herself, who is 34 and has an infant son, Jonah, with her partner, Kirsti Copeland, a Jew-by-choice. "I've always been aware of the boundaries in Judaism, and conversion touches those boundaries in a lot of ways in the same way that interfaith issues do," she said. "I'm drawn to issues of inclusion, and hoped I could be a bridge for people who perhaps have not felt welcome in the Jewish world."

While Copeland said those issues were always important to her, certainly having a partner who is a Jew-by-choice and doesn't "look

Jewish" has increased that awareness. "You always hear the stereotypes but now I'm hearing them in a different way because it's family," she said. At first, Copeland wasn't sure whether she should convert students because of the transitory nature of the college campus. "Based on our tradition, you hope the rabbi who converts them is the one who marries them and blesses their baby. [Becoming Jewish] is a lifelong endeavor." But it was the students who changed her mind. "They sought me out because they hoped they would find a community," she said. "This is their community, their congregation ... Hillel is a strong force in their lives. They see Hillel as their Jewish home."

Copeland is Reconstructionist, and therefore, she talks to the potential converts about having one kind of conversion as opposed to another. The majority choose to study with her, like Dori Moss, a researcher currently in the class. Moss, 35, grew up a Methodist in Texas, but left Christianity as a teenager. As her relationship with an Israeli man got more serious, he said he wanted their children raised Jewish, but whether she chose to convert was not important to him. They got married last year. Now, Moss has decided to convert on her own. "I don't need to do it to have the family I want," she said. "His family completely accepts me just the way I am." She said so far Reconstructionism seems like a good fit for her. "I'm still making up my mind about it, where I think we'll be most at home, but I think it will probably be Reconstructionist." Moss appreciates having a class right on campus since it's where she works and it's where she also learns Hebrew. "It seemed like a good way to get started on the conversion process."

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Riding the Persian Carpet to Fame: A Generation of Young Iranian Jews Takes a Stab at Showbiz

By Karmel Melamed
The Forward
September 16, 2005

"It sucks being Iranian these days," Iranian-born Jewish comedian Dan Ahdoot jokes in his stand-up act. "People ask me the dumbest questions... 'Yo, Dan, level with me. Are they making the nuclear weapons or what?' Like there's this big e-mail list that goes out every month to anyone who's Iranian, that reads, 'Greetings from Tehran. Everything is going according to plan. Soon all the Americans will die! And now birthdays: Mahmoud from Virginia is celebrating his 34th!'"

Though not necessarily for the reasons he outlines in his onstage routine, life has not been without its difficulties for Ahdoot. About five years ago, after graduating pre-med from Johns Hopkins University, he was set to enter medical school. But before he could even crack open an anatomy book, he decided to change course and take a shot at becoming a professional comedian. "My whole family was basically against it, but I used that as a motivation to prove them wrong," Ahdoot said. "Life is too short. You have to take risks. That's basically what I did, and thank God it's paying off."

The generation of Persian Jews whose parents fled revolutionary Iran 26 years ago is now struggling to find its voice. Like the members of many immigrant generations before them, they find that their parents are hoping they'll fulfill the American dream. But success can mean different things in different places. Two of the centers of Persian Jewish life in America — Los Angeles and New York — are also entertainment hubs, and for many young Iranian Jews it is the entertainment field and not law or medicine that offers their adopted land's true promise. Ask him what his name means in English, and Iranian Jewish stand-up comic Marvin Kharrazi will sarcastically say, "satisfied donkey!" His parents, however, are less satisfied. "I still can't have a conversation with my mom without her pleading with me to return to law school, or even consider medical school!" the 31-year-old Los Angeles-based comic said.

Ahdoot, 26, who hails from the Persian Jewish enclave of Great Neck, N.Y., has built a much-lauded act centered on life as a second-generation Iranian-American. (He was a finalist on the NBC reality show "Last Comic Standing.") But it seems that his act has gone beyond merely tickling funny bones and toward addressing the anxieties of his peers. "After my TV appearances, I've received e-mails from other Iranian Jews, saying, 'I'm a lawyer or a doctor, and I don't want to do this anymore,'" he said. Ahdoot noted that many Iranian Jewish families feel a strong need for their children to succeed professionally and financially, because a large segment of those who left Iran two-and-a-half decades ago were forced to leave behind vast fortunes. He also stated that being uprooted created among his parents' generation a sense that education was essential.

"Education is almost as important as money in our community, because it's something no one can take away from you," Ahdoot said. "Most parents in the community believe that 'we came here with nothing and we built this, so you're supposed to carry the torch.'" Comedy is not the only arena into which young entertainment-minded Iranian Jews have delved. Azita Zendel is among the growing number of Iranian Jewish filmmakers to have found success in the film industry. Prior to forming her own production company, Screen Entertainment Magic, Zendel worked for four years as an executive assistant to acclaimed writer-director Oliver Stone collaborating with him during the making of such films as "JFK," "Nixon" and "Natural Born Killers."

"I guess I have stories inside of me that need to be told, and I just love the work," Zendel said. "God knows it's not an easy route, but I really couldn't see myself doing anything else." Zendel said she never encountered objections to her career decision from her family. In fact, she gives credit to her parents for having exposed her to the performing arts at a young age. "When I was 6, my mother enrolled me in singing and music classes in Iran, which I really enjoyed," Zendel said. "In the U.S. I took acting classes, modern

dance, and was in a few musicals." After earning a bachelor of arts in communications and attending film school at University of California, Los Angeles, Zendel wrote, directed and produced her own independent film, "Controlled Chaos," which had a limited theatrical run.

While she understands how Iranian Jewish parents may be concerned with their children's financial stability, she feels that the pressure they apply can be counterproductive. "To be honest with you, parents aren't so wrong in saying their kids should have something else to fall back on," she explained. "What I mind is when they actively try to kill [artistic] desire in kids by bad-mouthing the arts." Young Iranian Jews also have ventured into the music realm. One emerging Southern California band that has attracted attention from the Iranian Jewish community and beyond is Baba Kazah, which has forged a unique sound by merging rock, pop and reggae elements.

The brainchild of Robert Kavian and Sam Dagighighian, Baba Kazah has taken many in the music industry by surprise. "It strikes people to see guys like us being the main part of this project, because they'll be expecting a dude with dreadlocks and a joint hanging out of his mouth. We don't really have that image," Kavian said. The two formed the band and began an independent record label, but they maintain their day jobs in property management and in engineering. "It's true that some Persians may look down on young musicians like us, pursuing entertainment careers, but we have both always recognized in our Jewish background fine world musicians like George Gershwin, Yehudi Menuhin and Bob Dylan," said Kavian. "Young Persian Jews trying to get into this business should know their roots but not be tied down to them. You should absorb all the good your culture has to provide and reject the negative materialism that discourages individual growth."

Karmel Melamed is an internationally published freelance journalist living in Southern California.

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Ancient Language Comes Alive for Iranian Jews in Today's L.A.

By Karmel Melamed
JTA Email Edition
September 21, 2005

It took Iranian Jews in the United States nearly three decades in exile from the land their ancestors called home for 2,700 years to appreciate the rich history and culture preserved in their literature. Considered one of the oldest but least studied Jewish writings in the world, Judeo-Persian writings consist of the Persian language written in Hebrew characters by Jews living in what today are Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and some parts of India during the last 1,000 years. "In Iran the Jewish community was not aware of the value of Judeo-Persian writings, but now that they are away from their home they feel more attached to their heritage and want to preserve it," says Nahid Pirnazar, founder and director of the non-profit Los Angeles-based House of Judeo-Persian Manuscripts foundation.

Pirnazar, who obtained her doctorate from UCLA in Iranian studies with an emphasis in Judeo-Persian writing, said she formed the House of Judeo-Persian Manuscripts in 2000 after a significant number of Iranian Jews in Southern California expressed their interest in learning more about these ancient texts. "There are probably hundreds and hundreds of Judeo-Persian manuscripts in the possession of Iranian Jews," Pirnazar said. "Not knowing what they are, they think they're copies of Torahs."

Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution sparked a mass exodus of Jews; today approximately 30,000 to 35,000 Jews from Iran live in Southern California. For the last five years, Pirnazar has spent her own money in addition to small donations from local Iranian Jews to acquire copies and even originals of Judeo-Persian manuscript collections owned by museums, libraries and individuals in the United States, Europe, Israel and Iran. Her ultimate objective is for the House of Judeo-Persian Manuscripts to amass the largest collection of Judeo-Persian works in the world. "Our first goal is to collect and transliterate these manuscripts into the Persian script before the generation that can read them easily is gone," Pirnazar says. "The next step is to eventually publish and translate some into English and other languages."

According to Padyavand, a series of books about Judeo-Iranian studies by professor Amnon Netzer of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Judeo-Persian literature consists not only of Jewish biblical translations and commentaries but also secular poems, dictionaries, medical texts, scientific treatises, legends, calendars and translations of works by non-Jewish masters of classical Iranian literature. The oldest Judeo-Persian manuscript — which is also the oldest extant example of Persian writing — is a 37-line merchant's letter dating to the year 750 A.D. It was discovered in the early 20th century by archaeologists in eastern Afghanistan, according to Padyavand. Judeo-Persian came into being following the Arab-Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century, when the Jews of Persia, who then spoke what is known as Middle Persian, refused to write the Persian language in Arabic letters but instead wrote Persian with the Hebrew letters they were familiar with, Pirnazar said.

Aside from its linguistic value, Judeo-Persian literature has been a unique window into the previously unknown and painful history of Iranian Jews, who lived under oppressive kings for centuries. According to Vera Basch Mooren's book, *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril*

and Heroism, the Iranian Jewish writer Babai Ibn Lutf chronicles in Judeo-Persian a seven-year time span in the early 17th century when the Jews in the Iranian city of Isfahan were forced to convert to Islam or face execution. In 1629 Isfahan's Jews ultimately were permitted to return to Judaism after two of their leaders interceded on the community's behalf with Safi I of the Safavid dynasty.

Pirnazar also said Iranian Jews continued writing and reading Judeo-Persian up until the beginning of the 20th century but gradually drifted away from it as they secularized and Iranian society opened to them. Bijan Khallili, an Iranian Jewish publisher and owner of the Los Angeles based Ketab Corporation, has been publishing Iranian Jewish-related books in Persian and English for more than 20 years. In 1999, his company published 3,000 Persian-transliterated copies of a Judeo-Persian Torah commentary originally written by the 12th-century Iranian Jewish writer Shahin. He also hopes to publish a Persian translation of a Judeo-Persian text written by the 15th century Iranian Jewish writer Emrani.

"Sales of the Shahin Torah were OK. Mostly only older Iranian Jews can read the book since it is in Persian," Khallili said. "The main problem is that younger people can't read Persian writing, and they are the ones usually buying these books because they want to learn about their history, so we are looking to publish more of them in English." Nearly five years ago, interest in Judeo-Persian was rekindled in the Southern Californian community after the Habib Levy Foundation in Los Angeles began providing endowments for a class on Judeo-Persian that was initially taught by Netzer and now is taught by Pirnazar at UCLA.

"A lot of Iranian Jews still do not know that Judeo-Persian studies exists," says Tannaz Talasazan, 21, an Iranian Jewish student at UCLA. "I think this course on Judeo-Persian is a great opportunity for young Jewish people, especially Iranian Jews who grew up here in America, to learn more about who they are and where they came from." The UCLA course not only has received tremendous praise from young Iranian Jews but also has sparked the curiosity of some Iranian Muslim students wanting to learn more about an aspect of Persian literature and poetry they hadn't known.

"Being able to read Judeo-Persian script was certainly a feeling that I will never forget," says Reza Khodadai, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War who now is a biochemistry major at UCLA. "It was at the final exam, when I answered the whole transliteration section, I was reading a script that had always been unknown to me and I was seeing that it was actually in my own language of Persian."

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At World JCC Conference, Officials Seek Solutions to Common Problems

By Dina Kraft
JTA Email Edition
September 21, 2005

In Bombay, Leora Ezekiel works to bring the Jewish community together from across the crowded, sprawling city. In Buenos Aires, Rabbi Fabian Skornik helps distribute food and medicine to Jewish families struggling in the aftermath of Argentina's economic crash. The two Jewish community center directors were among 250 participants from 35 countries attending the three-day World Conference of Jewish Community Centers, which began Monday in Haifa. Participants came from as far AWAY as Peru, Kyrgyzstan and Portugal. The conference usually is held every four years. The local challenges JCCs face may differ depending on the country and the continent, but the overall challenge of keeping Jews Jewish is common to them all as they grapple with how to make Jewish life an intriguing and viable option, especially to the younger generation.

The JCC directors and leaders are happy to have a chance to come together.

"For us it is a great opportunity to hear what other communities are trying and were successful in offering, and to give examples of our work," said Abraham Lehrer, president of the Federation Jewish Welfare Organization of Germany. Lehrer is from Cologne, where the Jewish population has surged from 1,200 to 5,000 in the past 15 years, since Germany began absorbing large numbers of Jews from the Former Soviet Union. Many of the Jews from the former Soviet Union arrive with little knowledge or background in Jewish life after decades living under Communist rule, making outreach to them a special challenge.

Lehrer, a lay leader who runs a software company, has been trading ideas with directors of community centers in the former Soviet Union who face similar issues. There are over 1,000 JCCs across the world, if one includes centers in Israel. The former Soviet Union, with 180 centers, now ranks third behind Israel and the United States. One of the projects highlighted at the conference was a mentoring program where highly effective JCC directors from Israel, the United States and England are sent to the former Soviet union to train counterparts there. The plan is to expand the project to other parts of the world.

The theme of partnerships and helping one another was reinforced at the conference. "It lets people know that we're only part of the global Jewish village. It's important for people around the world to know that we all have something in common and we are all responsible for one in another in a Jewish world," said Jerry Spitzer, president of the worldwide JCC group. Five new JCCs recently opened — in Poland, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Moldova. Wearing a scarlet-colored sari, Ezekiel of Bombay and several colleagues from Bulgaria, the United States, and elsewhere toured the Reform movement's Leo Baeck Education Center on

Tuesday. The center is a combination of a community center, high school, synagogue and education center. Through its social action programs, the center works with thousands of Haifa families, including Arabs, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia — many of them from poor neighborhoods where there are few social services.

As she walked through the center, with its glistening swimming pool and views of Haifa, Ezekiel spoke of the challenges of working in Bombay, where 4,000 Jews live in the city and its suburbs. Because the city is so large, she said, the community is too fragmented. We need to bring everyone together under one roof. Inter-marriage and anti-Semitism are not major issues in India, but keeping the community active and interested is. The Bombay JCC offers Sunday school, day camps and youth groups.

Across the globe in Buenos Aires, Skornik, a Conservative rabbi, tries to bring more young Jews into the JCC he runs, which is both a synagogue and a community center offering sports facilities, informal education courses and activities for the elderly. Some 400 families belong to the center, named Lamroth Hakol. Much of their focus is reaching out to families trying to get by financially after Argentina's economic crash of 2001-2002. In addition, the 160,000 Jews in Buenos Aires still are coming to terms with the bombings of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the main JCC in 1994.

The advantage of JCCs is that they're seen as welcoming, open places that can forge community in an easy, natural way, advocates say. "JCCs are an opening gate for many Jews," said Smadar Bar Akiva, executive director of the World Confederation of Jewish Community Centers. "It's where they feel comfortable just walking in."

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From a Village in China.... To the Wedding Canopy in Jerusalem

By Baruch Gordon
Israel National News
September 7, 2005

For the first time, a Chinese Jewish couple will get married Wednesday in accordance with the Law of Moses (Halakha) under a wedding canopy in Jerusalem.

Shlomo and Dina Jin are descendants of the Jewish community that existed for nearly a thousand years in Kaifeng, China. With the help of the Shavei Israel organization, the Jins recently completed their conversion back to Judaism by Israel's Chief Rabbinate, and will be getting married at 5:30 PM at Heichal Shlomo, 58 King George Street, Jerusalem. "This marks the closing of an historical circle," said Shavei Israel Founder and Chairman Michael Freund. "Nearly 200 years after the Kaifeng Jewish community essentially ceased to exist, two of its offspring will be joining together in matrimony under a Jewish wedding canopy in Jerusalem. This is a moving event, and it symbolizes the indestructible spirit of the Jewish people and their desire to return." Shlomo and Dina Jin with daughter Shalva at the Jerusalem Beit Din (Court)

The Jins' daughter Shalva, who converted with her parents, recently completed a year of volunteer national service (Sherut Leumi) at the Shaarei Zedek Medical Center. Jews first settled in Kaifeng over 1,000 years ago. At its peak, under the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the community may have numbered as many as 5,000 people. But by the middle of the 1800's, assimilation and intermarriage had taken a heavy toll, weakening the community spiritually and numerically. The last rabbi of Kaifeng died sometime in the first half of the 19th century; a few decades later, the synagogue and the community it had served were no more. Until today, however, there are still some 500 people in Kaifeng who continue to cling to a Jewish identity. Shavei Israel is a Jerusalem-based organization that reaches out and assists "lost Jews" seeking to return to the Jewish people. Under the ongoing supervision of the Chief Rabbinate of the State of Israel, Shavei Israel works with various groups around the world, such as the Bnei Menashe of northeastern India, who claim descent from a lost tribe of Israel, the Bnai Anousim ("Marranos") of Spain, Portugal and South America, as well as with the Subbotnik Jews of Russia.

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Jew in Chinese: Group Says a New Word is Needed for Jews

By Dan Bloom
Chicago Jewish News
Tuesday, September 20, 2005
www.chijewishnews.com/features.jsp#196784

The Chinese language comprises thousands of characters and combinations of characters, each composed of various strokes. Now a human rights group in Taiwan is calling on Chinese journalists and academics around the world to stop the "discriminatory" way that the characters for "Jewish people" are written in Mandarin. "There are many Chinese characters for 'you-tai,' or Jew, but the combination that is currently being used refers to an animal of the monkey species and has the connotation of parsimoniousness," Chien Hsi-chieh, the director of the Peacetime Foundation of Taiwan, said recently. Chien's remarks at a news conference in Taipei, complete with illustrations of the offending characters and the new characters he recommends, were widely reported in Chinese-language media across Taiwan and China.

Chien said the biased Chinese characters were devised by Christian missionaries in China around 1830, when they were translating the Hebrew and Christian Bibles into Chinese and needed a term for "Jews." "A better choice for the word 'Jews' in Chinese writing would be one that is pronounced the same but written with a more neutral character," he said. Following the news conference, held in Taiwan's Parliament, a local English-language newspaper quoted Zhou Xun, a Chinese professor at the University of London, as saying that it's not easy to define Jews as a people using a combination of two or three Chinese characters. "In fact, the current way of writing 'you-tai' to mean 'Jews' indicates the imagined physical difference between the Chinese and the Jews, which is rooted in the tradition of picturing all alien groups living outside the pale of Chinese society as distant savages hovering on the edge of bestiality," Zhou said.

Chien first brought the matter to the attention of the Taiwanese government in 2003 and again in October 2004, where it was discussed by officials in the Ministries of Education and Foreign Affairs and the Government Information Office, according to Dennis Lin, a public relations official at the Peacetime Foundation. The Taiwanese government under President Chen Shui-bian said it would help promote the new way of writing the term for Jews in books, newspapers and on the Internet if local civic groups continued to put forward the idea. But the government hasn't taken any concrete action yet, Lin said, noting that the government prefers to let the Peacetime Foundation, a private, nonprofit group, lead the international campaign.

Since Taiwan has no official diplomatic ties with Israel due to the Jewish state's "one China" policy, there have been no contacts with Jerusalem about the matter, Chien said, but he added that he has spoken with representatives of the Israeli trade office in Taipei on several occasions. "The Israeli trade office in Taipei has given us its support when we spoke to them about this and said it would be delighted to see this reform succeed," Chien said. Members of Taiwan's Jewish community, some of whom are fluent in Chinese but not in the ancient Mandarin writing system, are following Chien's campaign in the media. None would comment publicly for this article, since "the complex and varied way of writing Chinese characters is beyond most Westerners' comprehension," one longtime Jewish expatriate in Taipei explained. Jews are not the only people that written Chinese discriminates against, Chien added. He also recommended that the Chinese world community replace the current term for Islam, "hui," with a better combination of characters, "yi-si-lan," because the current term has a negative connotation of paganism.

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Texas Crypto-Jews Return to Judaism

By Leonard Martinez
El Paso Times
August 28, 2005

Descendants of those lost in Inquisition are found in world's fastest-growing ethnic group:Hispanic population, says Texas rabbi. 'I am sure that at least 10 percent of the worldwide Hispanic community today have Jewish ancestry from the Spanish Inquisition' After learning her family's history of being crypto-Jews, Guadalupe Ramos made the decision to formally convert to Judaism in 2001.

"It was important to me to do so to regain my Jewish roots," Ramos said. "When my husband finished conversion, I felt very complete. With every festival and Shabbat we celebrate, I feel we are regaining our Jewish roots little by little. Our family ... had generations who lost their Jewish roots. I hope future generations of my family will never lose it."

Crypto-Jews, originally called Marranos, are the descendants of the hundreds of thousands of Sephardic Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity and ultimately expelled from Spain and Portugal during the Spanish Inquisition 500 years ago. Many were tortured or killed. Ramos found out she was a crypto-Jew when she talked to a woman who knew her grandfather and great-grandmother who told her of some of the Jewish practices they performed. Ramos realized the connection she had to Judaism because she would make matzah - Jewish unleavened bread - just as her great-grandmother had done. "I didn't meet my great-grandmother, and I didn't know why, but I was making this bread," Ramos said. "Now I realize it is because we were crypto-Jews."

'Spark of curiosity'

Rabbi Stephen Leon of Congregation B'nai Zion said most of the crypto-Jews have settled in the Southwest, including the El Paso area and New Mexico. "I would like to put a spark of curiosity in the community because I know many, many people who are curious or suspect that they have Jewish roots," Leon said. The main responsibility of a Jew is "tikkun olam," or "repairing the world," and crypto-Jews can play a role in that, Leon said. "Our world is in desperate need of repair," Leon said. "Since September 11, worldwide

terrorist attacks and the recent bombings in London, it is clear that something has to be done. Imagine how much more we can do to save our world from destruction with the return of millions of crypto-Jews to Judaism."

Leon became aware of crypto-Judaism 19 years ago when he became rabbi at Congregation B'nai Zion. He said people in El Paso and Juarez who were following Jewish customs - lighting candles on Friday nights, covering mirrors when a loved one died and observing Jewish dietary customs - despite being Christians began to ask questions. As these anousim (Hebrew for "the forced ones," a term often used for the crypto-Jews) researched their roots, many discovered they were descendants of Jews whose faith was hidden for centuries.

Many have returned

During the past two decades, Leon has helped more than 30 families formally return, through conversion, to Judaism. He continues to work with dozens of other families in El Paso, Juarez, Ruidoso, Hobbs and Roswell. "It is my belief that the return of the anousim fulfills God's promise to Abraham that the Jewish people will be as numerous as the 'sands of the sea' and the 'stars in the sky,'" Leon said. "I honestly believe that once the crypto-Jews return in large numbers, that God's declaration will be realized and redemption will be at hand.

"But the descendants of those lost in the Inquisition are alive and well and are found in the fastest-growing ethnic group in the world, the Hispanic population," Leon said. "I am sure that at least 10 percent of the worldwide Hispanic community today have Jewish ancestry from the Spanish Inquisition." Sonya Loya, herself a crypto-Jew, said it goes beyond the Spanish Inquisition.

New Mexican Inquisition

"Most don't know there was a Mexican Inquisition, let alone a New Mexican Inquisition," Loya said. Loya is completing her return to Judaism and directs the Bat-Tziyon Hebrew Learning Center in Ruidoso. The center is a source of education, outreach and counsel to many crypto-Jews in New Mexico. It is the dream of Leon and Loya to establish a Sephardic Anousim Study and Learning Center in El Paso and other cities to inform Jews and the world the history of Sephardic Jews, the Inquisition and the plight of anousim today. The center would teach the importance of religious and ethnic tolerance. "For many of (the crypto-Jews) it was a hidden secret passed down orally," Loya said. "They were drawn to Judaism and don't know why. It wasn't until after they heard other stories that they realized their history."

Featured Articles List

Imagining Life as A Black Woman In the Bible

FICTION

By Ariella Cohen

The Forward

September 16, 2005

In a recent meeting with the Forward at the Hotel Plaza Athenee on Manhattan's posh Upper East Side, French novelist Marek Halter sketched one stone tablet, then its twin. He fashioned an ark around them and announced, "The Ten Commandments came from Moses." He paused, popped a wasabi pea in his mouth and set his napkin artwork aside. "My question is, who taught Moses about freedom, about respect, about being in a culture that is not your own?"

The recently published "Zipporah, Wife of Moses" (Crown) is the second title in Halter's "Canaan Trilogy," a series of novels inspired by the subtler stories of the Bible's peripheral female characters. Invoking a conscience for Moses' Midianite (read: Ethiopian, according to modern geography) wife, the novel is Halter's attempt to imagine life as a black woman in the Bible. While Halter creates Zipporah as a sage of biblical otherness, his own biography reads as one of 20th-century displacement. Born in 1936 in Poland, he escaped the Warsaw Ghetto with his family when he was 5. He lived in Moscow, the Ukraine and Israel before settling in Paris with his parents in 1950. From this scattered childhood he remembers reading only two books: "Bible Stories for Children's Digest" and a worn edition of Alexander Dumas's "The Three Musketeers" — fat pieces of literature that he would lug around in his mind for years to come.

Halter did not begin writing until the 1970s, establishing himself as a painter and a peace activist before publishing his first novel, "The Madman and the Kings," which in 1976 won the Prix Aujourd'hui. In France, Halter remains a visible peace activist, keeping up with political dalliances dating to 1967, when he founded an international Middle East peace coalition, and helped organize the first official meetings between Israelis and Palestinians. Halter knows Israeli Prime Minister Sharon, and to this day he takes credit for introducing late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to his wife, Suha Tawil. (The next match made by Halter might happen on the big screen, when he introduces his old friend Gérard Depardieu to the role of Abraham in next year's film remake of "Sarah," putting the French star opposite another friend of the writer, Italian actress Monica Bellucci.)

In Exodus, as in Halter's novel, Moses' first wife is the daughter of a Midianite priest, Jethro. The couple betroths after 40-year-old bachelor Moses — on the lam after striking to death an Egyptian whom he saw beating a Hebrew slave — defends the woman and

her sisters from marauders at a well (Exodus 2:16-21) and, as thanks, Jethro offers Zipporah's hand. Popping up now and again in sermons and Bible lessons around the time of Passover, Moses' first and only known wife has been learned largely, until now, in the context of Moses' trials. In one popular Exodus story, she saves her husband's life by taking a sharp stone to her son and demonstrating his Israelite status with a hasty circumcision. In the Book of Numbers, Moses takes heat from his sister Miriam and brother Isaac for marrying outside the race. When Zipporah and Moses have a son, they name him Gershom, meaning "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

The "Canaan Trilogy" is structured around an ethic of historical invention. But in order to even attempt to hurdle the obvious time, gender and color differences between him and his biblical first-person feminine protagonists, Halter went to his friends, plumbing their memories to evoke the experience of a woman's first period, or how it might feel for a black woman to marry a Jewish man. Based on the number of African-American book clubs already reading the tome, his efforts seem to have been successful. Still, American publishers found Halter's progressive spirit a bit too adventurous. Contrary to the cover of the British edition — which features a thin Zipporah who has high cheekbones, close-cropped hair and ebony skin — American editions show a longhaired and olive-skinned Zipporah, a wide approximation. (Let's put it another way: The American Zipporah more likely would be cast in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" than in "Jungle Fever.")

"Very interesting — 20 countries reprinted this book and all around the world she is black, but in the United States the distributor told the publisher that a black face won't work," Halter said. "Blacks in the United States don't want to be closed into their blackness," they said. Then came the reaction of the politically correct: We wanted to write, 'black wife of Moses,' but people wanted 'African-American.'" (No matter what Zipporah was, it's unlikely that she was American.) Not surprisingly, Halter has dealt with a far less skittish audience in his native France. Next up across the pond is a historical fiction account of King David's mistress, published by the French magazine *Elle*: "Batsheva: An Apology of Adultery."

Featured Articles List

Race and Relations in Zadie Smith's New Novel

By Joan Acocella

The New Yorker Magazine

September 26, 2005 - October 10, 2005

Zadie Smith's first novel, "White Teeth," published in 2000, when she was twenty-four was a big hit—a prize-winner, a best-seller. Some people claimed that this had less to do with the book than with Smith's "demographic": that, as a mixed-race write (Jamaican mother, English father) who was also young, female, and good-looking, she made perfect jacket copy, perfect book-tour material. That wasn't fair. The novel may have been loved for non-literary reasons, but she went beyond Smith's excellent cheekbones. Set in northwest London, in the black, white, and South Asian neighborhood where Smith was raised, "White Teeth" hinges on the friendship of a white, working-class Englishman, Archie and a Bangladeshi man, Samad. Archie is married to a black Jamaican woman; their daughter gets pregnant by one of Samad's Bengali sons, and it goes on from there—four-hundred-plus pages of racial devil-may-care. This, actually, is not altogether unrepresentative of modern London, but, as Smith herself has acknowledged, "White Teeth" is utopian in its treatment of race, and some readers, I believe, cherished it precisely for that. The book is ecstatically inclusive—Smith seemed to omit no incident, no character, no metaphor, no joke that struck her fancy—and in that come-along context the combining of races seemed right not just for this novel but for the world. Maybe people thought, postcolonial Europe was going to be O.K. after all.

Eventually, however, Smith decided that "White Teeth" was too inclusive. She described it as "a fat, messy kid who needs help." Not surprisingly, then, her next novel, "The Autograph Man" (2002), was tighter. This book, too, was emphatically multicultural. Its hero, an English autograph dealer, is half-Chinese, and a Jew; his best friend and his girlfriend, also English, are black Jews. But, as these pedigrees suggest, the book is self-aware. It is also rather cold. Its main subject is celebrity, a matter that, after the fevered publicity campaign surrounding "White Teeth," may have been on Smith's mind. But, like celebrity, the critique of celebrity is not a heartwarming business. In chastening herself, Smith seemed to cramp her spirit.

Now we have Smith's third novel, "On Beauty." Thesis, antithesis, synthesis? Yes, sort of. "On Beauty" is less expansive than "White Teeth," but more exalted than "The Autograph Man"—or "White Teeth." The subject is humanism, the relationship between beauty and goodness. (The title is taken from Elaine Scarry's manifesto "On Beauty and Being Just," which argues that the one leads to the other.) As a corollary, race is at last presented as a tortured subject. It creates difference, a challenge to any general conception of beauty or goodness. Again, the hinge is a racial cross: the marriage of Kiki Belsey, a black woman from Florida, and Howard Belsey, a white Englishman who is a professor of art history at a New England college. Soon after the book opens, the Belseys' thirty-year union is in trouble. Howard has had an affair, and, to Kiki, this is not just a marital insult but a racial one. "I gave up my life for you," she says to him—by which she means her life as a black person. A hospital administrator, a Maya Angelou reader, a believer in astrology, Kiki, for Howard's sake, has spent her entire adulthood among white academics, listening to them say things that she didn't agree with. Now he has repaid her by having a fling with a white colleague?.

Meanwhile, the Belseys' three children are living out the consequences of being mixed-race. Jerome, the eldest, a student at Brown,

has strayed from his family's liberal politics. He is working as an intern for Monty Kipps, a conservative black scholar—a wearer of three-piece suits, a campaigner against affirmative action. But Kipps is not just an ideological enemy; he is Howard Belsey's personal enemy. Howard, a convinced postmodernist, is writing a book on Rembrandt whose aim is to show that the Dutch master's vaunted humanism is just a cover for the enactment of power relations. He shows his students a Rembrandt nude and asks them to see it as "inscribed in the idea of a specifically gendered, class debasement." (Among other things, "On Beauty" is a satire on American universities. Smith recently spent a year as a fellow at Harvard, and she seems to have got a bellyful.) Kipps, for his part, has written a highly praised book reaffirming Rembrandt's humanism. Jerome thinks the world of him, and doesn't see why being black, or half-black, should cause anyone to oppose the social order. He likes the social order..

That's one mixed-race scenario. The Belseys' daughter, Zora, also a college student, shows us another. Zora is determined to enter the white world, and to find a place of power within it. Nevertheless, she falls in love with a black "spoken word" artist from the ghetto. Then, there's Levi, sixteen years old and desperate to reclaim his black roots. Levi wears a do-rag; only under duress does he detach the iPod earphones that, day and night, pipe rap music into his head. His one goal in life is to be "street." All week he waits for Saturday, when, without his parents' knowledge, he sells pirated DVDs on the sidewalks of Boston with a group of Haitian immigrants..

These different post-integration dramas give Smith the chance to address something she has not looked at closely before: *intra*-racial tensions. When Levi joins the Haitians, he is dispatched to a street corner with a skinny, tight-lipped man named Chouchou. Levi regards Chouchou with awe: "Down his right arm there was this knockout scar, rose-pink against his black skin, beginning in a point and then spreading out down his forearm like the wake of a ship." Levi knows no French, and Chouchou's name (which, ironically, means "dear") is a mystery to him:

"That's your name?" asked Levi, as they crossed the street. "Like a *train*?"

"What does this mean?" "You know, like a *train*, like choo choo! Train coming through! Like a *train*." "It's Haitian. C-H-O-U-C—"

"Yeah, yeah—I see . . ." Levi considered the problem. "Well, I can't call you that, man. How about just Choo—that works, actually. It works. Levi and Choo."

"It's not my name."

"No, I get that, man—but it just runs better to my ear—Choo. Levi and Choo. You hear that?"

No answer came.

"Yeah, it's street. Choo . . . The Choo. That's cool. Put it there—no, not there—like this. That's the way."

"Let's get on with it, shall we?" said Choo, freeing his hand from Levi's and looking both ways down the street.

This is subtle and poignant: a big, innocent, high-fiving boy, who has never missed a meal in his life, versus a man who is looking for his dinner money and whose "knockout scar" probably means to him things that the boy hasn't dreamed of.

Behind this plot about race relations however, there is another plot going on. In her acknowledgments, Smith says, "It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E. M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted." The first line of Forster's "Howards End" is "One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister." The first line of "On Beauty" is "One may as well begin with Jerome's e-mails to his father." In Smith's book, as in Forster's, a child of the "good" family (Jerome) falls in love with member of the enemy family (Kipps' daughter); an emissary (Howard) goes off to put an end to this, and only makes things worse; the mother of the enemy family (Kipps's wife), before dying, wills something valuable to the matriarch of the good family (Kiki), whereupon the enemy family ignore the bequest. On and on go the echoes, down to tiny details: a special concert, a special tree, special shopping trip.

This use of "Howards End," though it is an exemplary postmodern "appropriation," doesn't do the sort of subversive work that we expect from that maneuver. On the contrary, it underlines the new book's humanistic message, pulling Forster in to say, Yes, Zadie Smith is right, all human beings are connected and they are all in a muddle, which they must solve with love, more than with justice. But doesn't the shadow presence of "Howards End" also distort the plot of "On Beauty," bending it to extraneous purposes? It should, but the fact is that Smith's plots have always been a shambles. She is a novelist of ideas, and that concern, not realism, is what drives her stories. In a recent interview, Smith invoked Lionel Trilling, another novelist of ideas, who claimed that plot was essentially a laboratory. The novelist, like the scientist, sets up special conditions. What if we fed these mice only cupcakes? What if we married this traditional Southern black woman to a white British intellectual? That way we can get information about glucose metabolism, information about race, that wouldn't come clear under random circumstances.

The problem with this, for the novelist, is that the reader may rebel against the contrivance of the experimental situation. The marriage of Kiki and Howard is hard to accept. How could these two people, who seem to have almost nothing in common, have got together, and stayed together for thirty years? Every time they speak to each other, they seem to be speaking to someone else, across the room. The situation is worse than that, though. Kiki is the moral center of the novel, a woman full of warm, ancient, instinctual wisdom. ("Her gut had its own way of going about things"—the good way, always.) In other words, she is a black stereotype. Smith clearly knew she had a problem with Kiki, for, while she made her virtuous, she also made her enormously fat, and in case you are thinking that this might be another aspect of that woman's admirable earthiness, forget it. Obesity is a sort of obsession in Smith's novels. Sometimes it seems that ten pages don't pass without some poor fat person coming down the sidewalk, to her acidulous notice. Kiki outdoes all her predecessors; she weighs two hundred and fifty pounds. In a culminating episode, when she has sex with her husband on the living-room floor, Howard addresses himself to her "cataclysmic breasts," with their "silver-dollar-sized nipples, from which occasional hairs sprouted." Soon those breasts are bouncing and sweating. The scene is reminiscent of Gulliver's being clasped to the bosoms of the Brobdingnagian women; it is horrifying. In other words, Smith, deep down, is not sure

she likes her black icon. On the other hand, Howard, whom we're supposed to disapprove of—time and again, we're told that he's selfish, and divorced from his feelings (he is Smith's counterpart to Forster's Henry Wilcox, the character whose chastisement will be the book's primary lesson in humanism)—makes sense to us in a way that Kiki doesn't. His jokes are funny; he's fond of his children; he may not talk about his feelings, but he has them. Howard's end is honorable, but the plot that gets him there is highly artificial.

But, while the plot is a wreck, many of the episodes it engenders are not. They do what the realistic novel is supposed to do—hold up a mirror to its time. I have quoted only one good scene, but there are a lot more, on marriage and adultery, parents and children, professors and students. What interest me most, however, are the scenes about race, and, Kiki aside, the extent to which Smith has made them rich and complicated. Race has never been just race; it has always involved class as well, and history. But rarely have I seen a novelist explore that intersection—showing how the race-class nexus affects who says what to whom at a party, who wants to go to bed with whom, who pays a call on whom, and brings a pie—more energetically than Smith. This is not an untilled field. Indeed, it is a whole department of the modern English-language novel: the postcolonial department, which was born before Smith was. But she is especially well positioned for this project, not merely by being mixed-race but by being young, and thus having grown up—unthinking at first, taking what she saw just as life—in the ethnic stew that came together only in the past few decades. This means that she can talk about that world without self-consciousness and without fear of seeming racist. Such license may be an extraliterary virtue, but, when it comes to novels about race, I'll take my virtues where I can get them. Smith, with her predecessors, could help do for blacks what Saul Bellow, fifty years ago, did for Jews; that is, make them normal subjects for the novel, no longer people who have a sign over their heads saying "Jew" or "Black" but regular people, with the same privilege of texture—of self-contradiction and error, and thus of tragic force—as white people.

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