

Be'chol Lashon Update November 2006

November 2006 PDF

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UPCOMING EVENTS

SAN FRANCISCO



Celebrate Jewish Diversity
@ 3 Chanukah Events – Dec. 9 & 10

The Be'chol Lashon Chanukah celebration is unlike any Chanukah festival you have attended before!

Lucca's Dance Party (21+ only)
Saturday, December 9 @ 10pm

Luka's, 2221 Broadway, Oakland,
Cover charge: \$5 before 11pm, \$7 after

Move & groove with DJ Wisdom, spinning Reggaeton, Neo Soul, Old & New Skool & Dancehall. **More information:** <http://www.jewishresearch.org/events/Lukas.pdf>

Family Arts Day (FREE and OPEN TO THE PUBLIC)
Sunday, December 10, 1-4pm

Mission Cultural Center, 2868 Mission Street, SF,

Imagine a Chanukah party with Chinese Lion Dance; Capoeira & Afro-Caribbean drumming and dance workshops, "Farolito" Menorahs, Chanukah treats from Spain and Latin America and more!

More information: <http://www.jewishresearch.org/events/ChanukahFamDay06.pdf>

Vanessa Hidary's "Culture Bandit"

Sunday, December 10 @ 7pm

The Brava Theater, 2781 24th Street, SF

Tickets: \$19.75 www.brava.org or box office @ 415.647.2822

"Hilarious! ... Vanessa Hidary seamlessly blends the multicultural hip-hop of her New York youth with her strong Sephardic/Mizrahi heritage in a cutting-edge, spoken-word show."

More information: <http://www.jewishresearch.org/events/culturebandit.pdf>

CURRENT NEWS

Tearing down the stereotypes via film, art

By Staff Writers, October 20, 2006, j. weekly



Sometimes a little political incorrectness goes a long way.

Take Sacha Baron Cohen's "Borat," a new screen comedy that makes liberal use of extreme anti-Jewish imagery. Cohen plays Borat, a fictional TV journalist from Kazakhstan, crisscrossing America. Along the way he reveals his favorite hometown customs, like "The Running of the Jew," during which Borat encourages a mob to "kill the Jew chick before it hatches." This is the same Borat from Cohen's MTV hit "The Ali G. Show," who once led a real-life country honky-tonk audience in a sing-along of "Throw the Jew Down the Well."

Crass and uncomfortable, sure. But as our cover story notes, j.'s panel of three Bay Area Jews — a rabbi, a movie critic and a community professional — have seen the film and did not find it anti-Semitic at all. That's because they understood "Borat" is not about laughing at Jews. It's about ridiculing anti-Semites. Cohen is an agile guerilla satirist who turns the worst anti-Jewish stereotypes on their head. Just as Cohen rips those anti-Semitic canards by stretching them to absurd limits, a new local art exhibition at San Francisco's Contemporary Jewish Museum challenges other preconceived notions about what it means to be Jewish.

"The Jewish Identity Project," now running through February, is comprised of photography and multimedia displays, each in their own way addressing that perennial question: Who is a Jew? Some of the photos depict fervently religious Orthodox Jews in counterintuitive settings in the rural Midwest. Some show black Jews, Asian Jews and Hispanic "conversos" (those raised Catholic in Latin America who later discover Jewish roots and return to the fold). "Jewish Identity Project" astonishes, not only with its aesthetic beauty, but also its challenging point of view. Collectively the photos explore a diversity many in our community may not have known existed. Clearly, not every Jew in America looks or acts "Jewish."

What this exhibition does in a positive artistic way, Cohen does in a more cynically comic way. Both dangle and dismiss Jewish stereotypes, and do so with unyielding chutzpah. Not everyone will laugh at the misadventures of Borat. Not everyone will connect with the "Jewish Identity Project." But both prove the Jewish community will always find new ways of seeing itself, and of blasting those who refuse to grant us our humanity. "Borat" may not be your cup of tea. But Cohen's fearless Jewish pride, as well as the Jewish Identity Project's piercing perspective, has something important to offer.

Is It The Lost Tribe of Israel?

by Farzand Ahmed, November 6, 2006, *India Today*

"HIGHLIGHT:

A recent study has traced the origin of Afridi Pathans in a small town of Uttar Pradesh to the biblical 'lost tribes' of Israel. But the Pathans are not ready to accept themselves as Jews.

Malihabad, the small orchard town on the outskirts of Lucknow, will appeal to your senses straightway. While it is renowned for the sweet and fragrant Dussheri mango, the place has given birth to some of the finest Urdu and Persian poetry. And its claim to fame does not end there. The dusty town now stands home to something which can be traced back to biblical times. Among the inhabitants of Malihabad are a clan of tall, fair, well-built people who call themselves Afridi Pathans-warrior and poets. In fact, a huge arch at the entry to the town is dedicated to Bab-e-Goya, a famous warrior and poet. Growing evidence, however, suggests that their ancestry is not Muslim but Israelite and they are not originally from the Afghanistan-Pakistan area but are, in fact, one of the 'lost tribes' of Israel. In Malihabad, in the heart of Uttar Pradesh, they certainly stand out with their unique physical features.

Now a study by one of their own tribe, Navras Jaat Afridi, and published recently in the form of an e-book titled *The Indian Jewry & The Self-professed 'Lost Tribes of Israel in India'* traces their lineage to one of the 'lost tribes' of Israel. Says Navras, "The main purpose of the research (for a doctorate from Lucknow University) was to trace the Afridi Pathans' ancestry." To make his study credible, he got help from an international research team which included Professor Tudor Parfitt, director of the Centre of Jewish Studies, London University and Dr Yulia Egorova, a linguist and historian from Russia. The team visited Malihabad and collected DNA samples from 50 paternally unrelated Afridi males to confirm their Israelite descent. The reserachers looked at Israel's connections with Pathans in the Frontier areas of Pakistan and their links with Afridi Pathans in Uttar Pradesh's Malihabad and Qaimganj (Farrukhabad) as well as with Pathans in Aligarh, Sambhal and Barabanki besides tribes in Kashmir, Manipur and Guntur of Andhra Pradesh.

Historians and scholars like Professor S.N. Sinha, former head of the department of history, Jamia Millia Islamia and Professor V. D. Pandey, head of the department of medieval and modern Indian history, Lucknow University, have found Navras' research a 'landmark' study on the Jews in India and their links to Uttar Pradesh. According to the Bible, there were 12 tribes of Israel. The northern kingdom consisted of 10 tribes who were exiled and subsequently considered 'lost'. Four of 'lost tribes' have been traced in India: the Afridis, the Shinlung in the Northeast, the Yudu in Kashmir and the non-Muslim tribes in Guntur. Historians believe that Afghans were the descendents of Israel-another name of Abraham's grandson Jacob or Yaqub. They came to the region known as North West Frontiers and Afghanistan and as they moved onwards they were called Afridan, in Persian meaning 'newly arrived' and thus acquired the title 'Afridi'. Many of the Afridi-Afghans still follow Jewish tradition like Sabbath and circumcision on the eighth day of the birth."

For more information:

Researcher Claims Proof of Tribe of Ephraim in India

By Matt Zalen, November 14, 2006, *The Jerusalem Post*

Israel Seeks To Raise Profile of African Aid

By Rebecca Spence and Anthony Weiss, September 29, 2006, [Forward.com](http://www.forward.com)

At a recent symposium promoting Israeli aid to Africa, the Nigerian ambassador to America reflected on what he had learned in his previous post as ambassador to the Jewish state. The greatest lesson he took from those four years, he said, is that self-confidence is the key to a nation's success. Africans, he opined, should take a page from Israelis when it comes to believing in their own strength. "In Africa we are looking for models, and the Israeli model has worked for us," said Ambassador George Obiozor, speaking Monday afternoon to a packed auditorium at Columbia University, where some 170 students and representatives of Jewish organizations gathered to discuss Israeli and American Jewish efforts to stem famine and disease that plague the poverty-stricken continent.

The conference, "The Global Effort for Africa: Israel & American Jewish Community Initiatives," is phase one of a wider campaign to put Israel's work in Africa back on the radar screen. Organized by the Consulate General of Israel in New York and by The Earth Institute at Columbia University, which focuses its research on sustainable development and on global poverty, the forum brought together Israeli officials and American Jewish philanthropic leaders to outline the varying projects they have undertaken in Africa in recent years.

Those efforts, they said, stretch far beyond the campaign to end the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan — which has captured the media spotlight — and extend to tackling long-term problems in other developing countries, including Malawi, Mauritania and Nigeria.

The point — brought home by the laundry list of African nations where Israelis currently lend expertise in agriculture, water management and health care — is that the Israeli "miracle" of creating a robust agricultural sector in an arid desert can be applied to Africa, which faces similar geologic challenges.

On hand to plug Israel's work in the world's second-most populous continent was Ambassador Chaim Divon, director of Israel's Center for International Cooperation, which is known by the Hebrew acronym Mashav. "This is a time to revamp our activities and mobilize others," Divon said in an interview with the Forward. "We have not forgotten that we reached our level of development as a result of help, and it's our obligation to pass on the help and the know-how." Founded in 1958 by Golda Meir to bring Israel's technological, medical and educational advancements to the developing world, Mashav sends experts to work in poor countries and invites foreign citizens to attend skill-building training programs in Israel. Mashav was established in part as a strategic bid to win friends — with no dependable superpower allies at the time, Israeli leaders saw the African nations as potential partners in the United Nations and as counterweights to Israel's hostile Arab neighbors — and in part as an expression of Israel's moral commitments. A similar equation, Divon said, holds true today.

The push to raise Mashav's visibility grew to a certain extent from its partnership with famed economist Jeffrey Sachs, director of The Earth Institute. Last January, Sachs wrote an article, published in the journal *Sh'ma*, that attempted to corral Mashav into joining his efforts to end extreme poverty in Africa. "It is time for Israel to resume its large-scale aid to Africa, reviving and extending programs that were disrupted by miserable anti-Israeli politics in Africa a generation ago," Sachs wrote. Israel is now participating in the Ethiopian branch of Sachs's Millennium Villages Project, which pairs experts from around the globe with needy African communities.

In the 1960s and early '70s, Mashav was the centerpiece of a massive Israeli foreign aid program directed largely toward Africa. Yitzhak Abt, a former Mashav official, estimated that at its peak, Mashav sent abroad 100 experts at a time to work on long-term projects. In Zambia, Mashav developed an agricultural settlement program for former copper mine workers. In Ghana, Israeli experts helped establish the Black Star Line, the first African-owned ocean liner. And over the years, an estimated 250,000 Africans took part in educational training programs.

But Israel's relations with Africa soured in the early 1970s before they were completely severed in 1973, in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. As programs ended there, the agency's funding was slashed and Mashav looked to other parts of the world.

Over the past decade, Mashav again faced deep budget cuts as Israeli administrations sought to rein in government spending. According to a recent article in *Ha'aretz* by Eli Fried, a scholar at Tel Aviv University, Mashav's budget has dropped to 3% of the Foreign Ministry budget, down from a one-time high of 34% in 1959-60.

Mashav currently operates on a \$15 million annual budget. Even so, Divon said, Israel's investment in Africa should not be measured in dollar amounts. "It's the know-how we bring to the table," he said, "the results of investing hundreds of millions in research and development, and sharing those developments with others" that counts.

IDENTITY

Jewish Moms, Chinese Daughters

By Merri Rosenberg, March 2006, Lilith Magazine



It's just a little hard for me to think of this little China doll taking my mother's name. Your grandmother--this would be hard to explain to her."

-from Daniel Goldfarb's 2004 play "Sarah, Sarah"

But it's not so hard to explain anymore. During the past decade, plenty of Jewish grandparents have become familiar with the situation explored in this play, in part about the decision of an older, single Jewish woman to adopt a Chinese baby girl. It's much like real life.

Today, "you're shocked when you see an Asian child with an Asian parent," observes Miriam Hipsh about her former neighborhood on New York's Upper West Side. Hipsh is a 59-year-old writer and the founder of a dating web site for the 50-plus set; she adopted her daughter, WuQing, 11 years ago.

Hipsh's experience--and Goldfarb's play--reflect the convergence of two trends: Older Jewish women, some of whom have spent decades building up careers, who recognize that they want to experience motherhood, and China's "one child only" social policy, which resulted in the large-scale abandonment of baby girls in orphanages. The resulting phenomenon--of single Jewish women adopting Chinese daughters--has begun to transform the Jewish community. In preschools, day schools and after-school religious programs around the country, Asian girls are absorbing Jewish traditions through songs, history lessons and prayers, and learning the davening skills that will enable them to take their place on the bima. And at the same time, their conscientious Jewish mothers, eager to have their daughters embrace both their Jewish and Asian heritage, have enrolled them in Chinese language classes, or Chinese dance, art and music programs, to develop their girls' diverse identities.

Consider WuQing Hipsh, now 12, who is a product of Manhattan's Stephen Wise synagogue nursery school and pre-K program, as well as a veteran of the Hebrew school at B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan. (Like most of the Chinese daughters adopted by Jews, WuQing was formally converted to Judaism as a baby.) Since 2003, Hipsh and WuQing have lived in East Hampton, New York, where WuQing (whose Hebrew name, Devorah Sarah, is in memory of Hipsh's late mother, Dorothy), studies Chinese in her middle school and attends Hebrew school locally. She is preparing for her bat mitzvah next year.

"We're at Adas Yisroel, a very small congregation in Sag Harbor [N.Y.], that feels like a community," says Hipsh. "They welcome her. She's much loved by the synagogue. It feels wonderful."

However statistically small this phenomenon of Jewish single mothers with adopted Chinese daughters may be in the greater demographic picture, it has transformed the Jewish communal landscape in ways that weren't even imagined when these founding mothers first ventured to China little more than a decade ago.

Scott Rubin, co-author with Gary Tobin and Diane Tobin of *In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People* (2005) says that "Chinese girls are being adopted by single women in the Jewish community partly because women with higher levels of education are having children later, and adoption is the avenue they pursue, and Chinese girls are available for adoption. There's an added advantage," Rubin says. "Chinese girls are viewed as less threatening [than boys, or than children of other backgrounds]. We definitely heard the positive stereotype about Asian girls ... 'good behavior' and 'sweet natures' as well as being good students."

Rabbi Cantor (she holds both titles) Angela Warnick Buchdahl, of Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York, is the daughter of a Korean mother and an Ashkenazi Jewish father. She was raised in a Jewish household and believes that, "It's different now than when I was a child growing up. It's not as unusual to see children of different races being Jewish."

Still, she notes, "young children look around and don't see Jewish children who look like them. It's still hard. And on an intellectual level, there's the whole question of 'what does it mean to be a Jew?' You're part of a religion, but you're also part of a people, ethnicity or even race. Are we truly an open community, or are we not?"

These questions have begun to intrigue scholars, who are exploring such issues as Jewish identity outside the conventional, Ashkenazic, Euro-centric model. Patricia Lin is project coordinator for the 2003-2007 study of "Asian American Jewish Experience and Identities" at the University of California/Berkeley--and herself a Jew by choice. She says, "There is a struggle within the

Jewish community, not just with Asians, to realize the real diversity of the Jewish world."

Adds Buchdahl, "There should be images of non-white children in our [Jewish] books, in the movie and video images. There's an Ashkenazic assumption that it's the Jewish cultural norm. The Jewish community of North America is not honest about representing the historical diversity of our community. It's a challenge for us. We come from mixed multitudes, who were dispersed in many communities, [yet] the Jewish European community is the only one that's taught. We've all been strengthened and enlivened and made more rich by all that learning."

In their book, Gary and Diane Tobin and Scott Rubin show that American Jews are in fact a multi-racial, diverse community. According to their research, 20 percent of the six million Jews in the United States are non-Caucasian: Asian-American (the adopted Chinese girls are not a statistically significant part of this population), African-American, Latino, Sephardic, Middle Eastern and mixed-race Jews. Conversion, adoption and intermarriage have all contributed to this redefinition of who "looks" Jewish. Gary Tobin points out in a telephone interview that "the make-up of the Jewish people has always been remarkably diverse. Biblical scholars will tell us that we were a collection of tribes. Pay attention to the Torah. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob took spouses from someplace else. Moses and David married black women."

When Lee Miller, a New York-based playwright, decided in 2000 to adopt as a single woman, she recalls "I was originally thinking of going to Russia, which was my family background." Perturbed by the health problems of some adopted Russian babies she had read about who had fetal alcohol syndrome or other problems--and plagued by the idea that someday her child might look at her and think, "My ancestors killed her ancestors," she looked elsewhere. Miller says that she found, in contrast, that the Chinese children came from "regular families" and were available for adoption either because their parents were too poor to raise them or because of China's only one-child allowing.

Seeing a documentary about orphaned Chinese baby girls, Miller felt that "all these little girls needed help." And so she undertook the journey to find her daughter, Emma Yael, now 10.

Miller, who had her daughter converted at B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan, where her dip in the mikvah was witnessed by Miller's mother and sister, says, "My Orthodox aunt could not have been happier--one more to enter the fold."

What may seem relatively simple when bringing a baby or toddler to a Families with Children from China playgroup takes on other meaning when pre-adolescent girls start to explore their dual identities. Nor is this an entirely uncharted situation--the experience of an earlier generation of adopted Korean orphans suggests some ways this scenario may play out.

As Dr. Lin has observed in her study participants from across the U.S., Canada and elsewhere, Asian children who have been doted upon by a community when they are young may have quite different experiences as they grow up. "I've talked to women--Korean adoptees--who went up to bat mitzvah age in their synagogue, and were shunned once they were in their 20s and 30s. When they leave the community, or are not with their parents, they're seen as Asian. They're not being accepted as Jews in Hillel. They'll walk in with a Caucasian non-Jew, and the non-Jew is thought to be the Jew. The Jewish community is not universally welcoming."

Recently, some young Chinese girls in the Boston-area Jewish community have been invited to partner with Asian college students at Wellesley College, in a kind of big-sister program. "The adoptees feel this is great," says Lin. Lin underscores the importance of recognizing the centuries-long historical connections between Jews and China to help these families make the connections easier for their daughters. "There were Jews in China a real long time ago," she explains. Providing a strong Jewish identity, balanced with an equally respectful nod towards their Chinese heritage, is a major priority for the mothers of these Asian-Jewish daughters.

Judi Sherman of Phoenix, a senior vice-president at investment house Smith Barney, has been clear that her Chinese daughter is going to have a bat mitzvah. Her nine-and-a-half-year-old, Annie Gabrielle LiNa (the last part of her given name is Chinese) "is very much into learning about Judaism," says Sherman. "She's never questioned her identity. Out West, the religion seems to be very welcoming. Our rabbi has a sibling who adopted a Chinese daughter."

Integrating the two traditions has so far not given rise to anything that might shake up the Jewish world. Rabbi Judy Spicehandler, a rabbi-educator at North Shore Congregation Israel in Glencoe, Illinois, says that when her 14-year-old Chinese-Jewish daughter was younger they would decorate their succah with Chinese images, like a dragon. "I did everything--Chinese, Hebrew, English," says Spicehandler. "I tried to merge the Chinese theme. My daughter was very comfortable with her Jewish identity."

While issues around bat mitzvah are imminent, concerns about dating are farther away--and most of the women interviewed said that they weren't worrying about that for now.

With a bat mitzvah on the horizon, Hipsh says, "At 13, they choose. She could choose not to be Jewish, but it's not an issue. She's a Jewish child in a Jewish family. I don't know what awaits her. I don't know about her identity search; as yet, there's not the need to deny any part of it. I'm not worried about the dating part. My grandchildren will be Jewish. I made a decision that the more identity I give her, the easier it will be for her." To encourage an identity with her Chinese side, the family is part of a group of other single mothers, some of them Jewish, with Chinese daughters, who frequently get together for Chinese food and other celebrations, Jewish and otherwise.

As 11-year-old WuQing sees it, "When you're adopted, you get to choose whether you're Jewish or not. At my bat mitzvah, I'm going to say I'm choosing to be Jewish." What she enjoys about her dual heritage is that "You get to celebrate more holidays--like Chinese New Year's, normal New Year's and Jewish New Year's."

Most of these girls are still too young to have had a bat mitzvah. Others are still in the planning stages, with not much thought given to details, except perhaps for including Chinese food in the party menu. One teenager, who did not want her name used for this article, is at a point where she wants simply to be "another white Jewish girl" and not have to deal with the dual identity she confronts in the larger world. Almost all adoptees wrestle with issues of dual identities, but for children adopted out of orphanages there can also be a residual "survivor's guilt" about those left behind.

For her traditional bat mitzvah, this girl's dvar Torah concerned the "Mishpatim" portion, which includes the passage about "not wronging a stranger" or the widows and orphans in the community. She directly addressed the larger social issue of why there are so many adoptees from China, and urged her listeners to take positive action to help these children. She said, "These children are like the widows and orphans of the Torah. They are very vulnerable and they need our help. Ignoring them is just as bad as oppressing or wronging them. Some of the children are lucky, and find wonderful homes in other countries with families that adopt them and love them. But we have to help the ones who never have the chance. That is why I will be donating part of my bat mitzvah presents to help children in the orphanages, especially in the Wuhan Foundling Hospital, which is the orphanage that found me my family ... Everyone can actively do something to help others, like donate money or clothing or food or time to help people who are less fortunate. If everybody did that, soon there would no longer be any strangers, the whole world would all be one mishpacha."

Despite this heartfelt melding of Chinese and Jewish experience, reactions to giving these Chinese girls a Jewish identity are still not always predictable. "I got a lot of grief for sending her to a Jewish day school from the general Chinese adoption community," says Joan Story, a clinical social worker in Manhattan with a 7-year-old daughter, Alexa. "They felt she wouldn't be around a lot of other Asians. She would have been in a New York private school anyway, with only a few Asian children in each class. There are some adopted Asian children in her school, just not in her class."

When Story attempted to introduce Alexa to a Chinese dance class, Alexa refused to go back. As Story concedes, "She's very identified with the Jewish community. She told me that 'We can't leave this building. It's special, because this building celebrates Christmas and Hanukkah. Other buildings are just Christian.'"

Single mothers aren't the only ones to struggle with these issues. Randi Rosenkrantz, 55, of Houston, Texas, and her husband, 52, made sure that both of their adopted Chinese daughters--10-year-old Jill and 6-year-old Kate--had Jewish baby naming ceremonies as well as immersion in the mikvah. "I wanted my children to be well-grounded, and in a Caucasian family where they do not look like us, I need and wanted to find a way. So I decided that through our religion they would hopefully feel more of a connection," she explains in an e-mail message. "They will both have a bat mitzvah."

Rosenkrantz is making an effort to ensure that her daughters are linked to their Chinese heritage as well. "We stay connected to other families who have adopted from China," she says. "We have Asian influences in our home, especially artwork. I have a book collection myself that the kids will share as they get older, that have to do with China and/or Chinese adoption. I bought books for the kids on China that were age appropriate. We celebrate Chinese New Year."

With her husband, Lisa Gibbs is raising two daughters, 10 and 5, both adopted from China. Uncomfortable with the egalitarian Conservative synagogue they initially belonged to in Brooklyn, Gibbs--who attended yeshiva until eighth grade--switched her daughters to a Jewish cultural program. Gibbs reports in an e-mail, "While I am somewhat sad that [her daughter Basya] will have a less traditional Jewish upbringing, I like the program there far more in terms of Jewish ethics, and I notice that they are doing far more in the area of Jewish identity ... She has even decided that she likes learning Yiddish--and this is after refusing to learn Chinese, and hating Hebrew at Hebrew school and Spanish in public school! Somehow this school has made learning Yiddish a positive to her!"

Gibbs adds, "I want them to feel REALLY Jewish and REALLY Chinese, not some watered-down version." Her 5-year-old, Mira, takes Chinese dance class and watches Chinese language and song tapes.

For other parents whose adopted Chinese daughters are still quite young, there is an almost touching faith that by the time their

girls are older there will be no doubt about their place in the Jewish community.

Debbie Halperin, living in Suffern, New York, has a 3-year-old daughter from China, and an 11-year-old daughter from her first marriage. "The little one goes to synagogue for nursery school," she says. "Laci loves being Jewish. She loves Hanukkah, she knows the prayers for Shabbat. She's a Jewish girl through and through. She's part of the Jewish family. She'll have a bat mitzvah and be married under a huppah." Halperin, 42, is a founding member of a Jewish/Asian adoption group that recently celebrated its third Hanukkah party.

Ultimately, of course, little matters other than the bonds that have formed between mother and daughter. "She's been enriched by the Jewish element, and I've been enriched by the Chinese element," notes Hipsh. "It's all good."

A Conspicuous Family

By Gina Hagler, October 2006, Interfaithfamily.com



We are often referred to as a "conspicuous family." Sometimes we're described as "diverse." We like to think of ourselves as "wonderful." Any way you term it, we are a Jewish family with a biological son and an adopted son and daughter. Since the children who joined us through adoption are of Korean descent, people notice when we walk into a temple.

Before we adopted, we gave considerable thought to what it would be like for Asian children to be raised as Jews. Our primary concern was whether or not they would be accepted in the Jewish community. Since we were interfaith at the time and not exactly enjoying a stellar reception as it was, we got past that worry quickly enough. And we'd read about the growing number of Jewish families adopting Asian kids even if we didn't know any from personal experience. We weren't quite sure of the specifics of how best to meet our family's needs as a "conspicuous family" who happened to be Jewish, but we decided to go ahead and adopt.

Looking back over the past 10 years, the day-to-day raising of our kids as Jews has been easy because much of our observance is home-based. Lighting candles on Shabbat and incorporating tashlich (sprinkling crumbs into a moving body of water to symbolize casting away the things you regret as you look forward to the coming year) into our Rosh Hashanah observance doesn't depend on being members of a congregation. Our kids know all about the holidays and observances from what we share with them. They self-identify as Jews.

But we wanted our children to observe Judaism within the embrace of a community. Finding the right community, however, took some work. The temple we belonged to at the time we were adopting was welcoming enough. The rabbi and staff made no distinction between our adopted children and our biological son. Some of the staff even had or knew of people with internationally, transracially adopted children. As our children were ready to enter nursery school, we felt a bit less comfortable. It was our fellow congregants who quickly pointed out that the little Chinese girl who was also a member of the congregation would be the perfect future bride for our adopted son. There was nothing exactly wrong with that, but it wasn't quite right, either. It was time for a change.

Feeling a bit like Goldilocks, I explored other congregations. Some had a more diverse membership, but their practice of Judaism was not as clearly defined as I wanted. Some had the Judaism component just right, but no other transracial families. Where was the congregation with those Jewish adoptive families I'd read about?

We finally found it two years ago. It's not close by, but it is a warm, welcoming congregation, firmly rooted in Judaism. There are lots of "conspicuous families" who all happen to be raising their children as Jews. We see many families who look like ours. We find many families who share our concerns and celebrate our differences. This has been a positive experience for my Asian children, as well as for our biological son. It means a great deal to all of us to see lots of different types of families when we participate in the congregational Shabbat (Sabbath) dinners and tashlich observances. In fact, seeing families that look like ours may not ultimately have been as important as being in a place where all the families are not alike--no matter in what manner. A bonus is that we've found other families from our area who also bypass closer congregations because while not themselves adoptive families, they've sought out a more diverse congregation as a model for their own children.

I asked our younger kids what they thought of being in a congregation with a lot of other kids who are also adopted. They said it was great because they didn't have to explain over and over again why they didn't look like their mom and dad--everybody

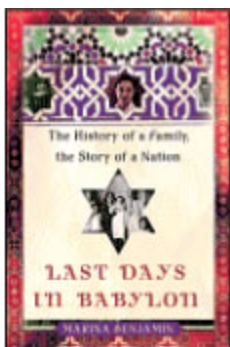
already knows. For our older son, it's been just as meaningful because he doesn't feel the awkwardness of well-intentioned people searching the room for his siblings. Where we are now, the possibility that his brother and sister are a different race than his exists clearly at the front of everyone's consciousness.

For my husband and me, belonging to a congregation with other families like ours puts into action our words about diversity. It also fits what we tell them about Judaism being about what you believe and how you live your life, rather than how you look. If we did not live in an area with such a congregation, we would be more involved in something like Stars of David, a non-profit organization dedicated to the celebration and support of adoptive Jewish families. We've seen firsthand that it makes a tremendous difference to be in a place where we are just another family.

Ideally, our children would have more role models of Asian Jews but we're confident this generation of Jews, with so many transracially adopted children, is going to be the generation that grows these future Asian rabbis and cantors. For now it's enough for our children that their peers reflect them and our congregation makes them truly welcome.

Baghdad Blues

Interviewer Ariel Beery, October 27, 2006, Forward.com



This month, Free Press publishes “Last Days in Babylon: The History of a Family, the Story of a Nation,” by British journalist Marina Benjamin. In “Last Days in Babylon,” Benjamin follows the decline and near destruction of a once-thriving Iraqi Jewish community through the story of her grandmother, the daughter of a proud Iraqi family forced to leave its home as anti-Zionist fueled anti-Jewish feelings among their countrymen. In advance of the publication, Benjamin discussed the importance of tracing one’s roots, her family’s reaction to the book and the twilight of Iraqi Jewry with the Forward’s Ariel Beery.

Article tools

Q: How would you compare your interest in returning to the land in which your forbears lived to the interest of Ashkenazic Jews who remain fascinated with the culture of Europe? Do you feel a similarity or a distance from those Jews who take heritage trips to Poland and Russia?

A: I think there are definitely parallels: Your parents inhabit a world that has disappeared, that won't be re-created and can't be re-created, and all you can do is go back and look for hints and traces. Going back to Poland and to Russia and looking for the shtetl communities is very similar to what I was doing. You are looking at a generation that is fast fading out of the present and into history, and there are very few people around who have living memories of the lives we are trying to conjure before the 1930s, for example, or the 1920s or before the Russian revolution.

One of the things that appealed to me about using my grandmother as the central character of the book is that I'm fascinated with 20th-century life spans that are now coming to an end. My goodness, my grandmother was born during the Ottoman Empire!

It fascinated me that that was her understanding, and that was what she grew up with, and then of course the British invasion of Iraq in 1917 changed all that, and was the first experience in the Middle East of colonialism, as well. I don't want to belabor the point, but the lessons that are to be drawn from the occupation and the subsequent management were a very potent model for the present occupation: Many of the same mistakes have been made, good will not withstanding.

Q: Considering how much of your family's personal life was detailed, what was your family's reaction to the book?

A: My mother had a very emotional reaction — and I was glad that she had an emotional reaction, because one of the challenges I set is that I wanted to get the reader invested in the idea of this community and what it stood for, and how it operated, and its closeness and its humor, and all its peccadilloes. I had to do this on the basis of interviews and on the basis of customs I had inherited secondhand, and obviously there were threads of continuity between the culture that existed there among the Jews in Iraq and the one that the Diaspora has maintained, lovingly. But it is still secondhand for me, so the challenge was to give it something that can resonate emotionally with an Iraqi Jew. So I was very pleased that it moved her.

There were a couple of things that she was petitioning me to take out of the book, but I insisted on leaving in. When I described my grandmother's loss of virginity, it was simply too close to the bone to her: The Iraqi community is very conservative, and I think that no Iraqi Jew from that conservative community would have ever written a book like this. My husband is an American WASP, and I had inherited a certain freedom once I left the community — a freedom to move and a freedom to look back and a freedom to disclose those things that that you wouldn't if you remain within the community. [And] I didn't want to write a hagiography. I wanted to try and capture an era that has disappeared and the experiences of the people who have lived through it.

Q: You write about the last remaining Jews of Baghdad and, in doing so, declare that millennia-old Jewish life there has come to an end. Those Jews who remained behind, you write, chose to be Iraqis first and Jews second. Would there be inherent worth in the reconstitution of Jewish life in Iraq?

A: It is a question that is hard for me to answer, as someone who was not born in Iraq. But I know many Iraqis who would certainly entertain going back, were such a thing possible, and who believe Jewish life should be resuscitated. As I write in the book, this is a place of ancient importance to the Jews. In fact, one of the responses to the Balfour Declaration was that Iraqis couldn't quite understand why Palestine was being chosen as the national home. They said: "Well, why can't Mesopotamia be the national home? We have the history! Abraham was born here, Daniel was here, Ezra was here." You can't accuse the Iraqi Jews of never being proud of their heritage.

Q: When you think back on your family's history, what is the story or heirloom you are most proud of? What piece of information would you like your children's children to know?

A: In some ways it's the thing we don't have — the box of dental instruments that my grandmother had to give away, that belonged to her father-in-law. And partly it is because she had to give it away that I want them back. The Jews who left Iraq left as paupers, they left as refugees, they left with subterfuge, they couldn't keep the heirlooms with them, they couldn't keep those things that reminded them of a very proud heritage, of their education, of their cultural standing, of the very idea of continuity — that such a set of precious things as dental instruments, tools of a trade, would be passed on from father to son but not anymore. That is a very emotionally charged thing for me. The fact that my grandmother sat in her transition camp, in her tent in Nes Ziona, mourning aloud for the china that she had to give away. Those things move me. And especially in a country like England where I live, where heritage is everything, and I can go to my friends houses and they'll have tea sets and pieces of china from the Victorian Era that had been handed down by their great grandparents, and in my parents' house everything is brand new. The past is something that is cherished in memory, and its material manifestations have just evaporated. To actually be able to get something back that had been lost would be nice.

COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

Unique Ways Chanukah is Celebrated Worldwide

By Benita Baker, November 2006, JewishOttawa.org

Chanukah is the Jewish Christmas. Let's face it. How many times have we found ourselves in situations where we clumsily explain our Jewish holiday. Christmas can be an awkward time of year for Jews. So maybe we overcompensate with presents and get caught up in "the spirit of the season" but we also know that Chanukah is so much more than a Jewish response to a world obsessed with Christmas.

The real meaning of Chanukah is not about giving presents. It is about celebrating heroism, courage and religious freedom. And when it comes to heroes and holiday symbols, Judah Maccabee far surpasses Santa Claus as a role model.

The spirit and meaning of Chanukah took on new meaning when Israel became a state. The early Israeli settlers saw themselves as modern day Maccabees and they rallied around the symbolism of Chanukah. Each year on the first day of Chanukah, athletes gather at the graves of the Maccabees in Modin. They light a torch there and begin a relay race, handing it off from one to another, until the torch arrives in Jerusalem where the President lights the menorah at the Presidential Palace. The torch is also taken to Mount Zion where it is used to light menorahs in memory of Holocaust victims.

The traditional Chanukah food in Israeli is sufganiyot, fried jelly-filled doughnuts. In 1997, near the Israeli town of Afula, a 12 foot high pyramid consisting of 6,400 sufganiyot was erected in an attempt to get into the Guinness Book of Records.

In an equally remarkable undertaking that same year, a 60 foot tall menorah weighing 17 metric tons was built in the town of Latrun. Each night of the holiday, a rabbi had to be lifted by crane to light the candles. Menorahs in public places and public candle lighting ceremonies are becoming more prevalent throughout the world. Lighting the National Menorah in Washington is an occasion attended even by the US President. In New York City's Central Park a 32 foot high menorah is lit each year, also with the help of a crane.

In their attempt to reach out to Jews and spread the message of religious freedom the Lubavitch are behind many of these ceremonies, including two local events. This is the 13th year that the Canadian Friends of Chabad Lubavitch have organized a menorah-lighting ceremony on Parliament Hill. The Ottawa Torah Chabad is hosting the 5th annual Chanukah celebration at the former city hall on Centrepointe Drive. Last year over 200 people attended this popular event.

As they have done with other Jewish holidays, communities throughout the world and throughout time have given meaning to Chanukah with their own unique rituals and customs. Many Sephardic Chanukah traditions differ from the Ashkenazic. In a Sephardic home only the head of the household lights the Chanukah candles. Contrary to the Ashkenazic way, the shamash is lit last and is not used to light the other candles.

Jews from the Syrian town of Aleppo light an extra shamash candle every night of Chanukah as a gesture of thanks to their country for giving a home to their ancestors when they were expelled from Spain. Turkish Jews make candles from the flax fibers used to wrap the etrog. The remains of these Chanukah candles are then melted together to make another candle used to search for bread crumbs pre-Passover.

Many Sephardic Chanukah traditions focus on children and on charity. In Kurdistan and Iraq, children would make an effigy of Antiochus and carry it from door to door collecting food donations. The effigy is thrown into a bonfire on the last day of Chanukah. Children in Yemen are given a coin each day to buy sugar and a red powder that is used to make a wine-like beverage which they drink at a giant evening feast.

Chanukah has special meaning for Sephardic women. For them the heroes of Chanukah are Hannah, who watched her seven sons die because they would not bow down to idols, and Judith, who severed the head of the cruel Greek ruler causing the enemy soldiers to flee. In their honour, women do not work while the Chanukah candles are lit. Instead of eating foods fried in oil on Chanukah, Sephardim eat dairy food to remember that Judith defeated the Greek tyrant because she fed him cheese and wine until he fell asleep.

Since Chanukah is not a holy day, some Jews do not celebrate it all. Abera Minywab did not know about Chanukah until she immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia. In Soviet Russia, lighting candles was a conspicuous religious act that few Jews would risk. Even if they wanted to celebrate Chanukah, it was against the law to manufacture and sell candles.

No account of holiday traditions would be complete without a heartwarming story about celebrations during the Holocaust. In 1943, the inmates at Bergen-Belsen were determined to celebrate Chanukah. The men saved scraps of fat from their food rations to make candles and the women pulled threads from their clothes and twisted them into wicks. Half of a raw potato became the menorah. This courageous act honouring the courageous acts of our ancestors must have given them strength and hope. That is the essence of Chanukah.

Amazon Rabbi's Gravesite Becomes Pilgrimage Place for Local Christians

By Bill Hinchberger, October 16, 2006, JTA

The details of Rabbi Shalom Emmanuel Muyal's mission and death in the Amazon remain obscure, but that's nothing compared to the mystery surrounding his afterlife. Local Catholics have named him the Santo Judeu Milagreiro de Manaus, or the Holy Jewish Miracle Worker of Manaus. His tomb receives regular visits from Christians who attribute magic to his spirit.

The rabbi's draw is so strong that local Jewish leaders felt compelled to refuse a request from his nephew, a member of Israel's Knesset, to have his remains removed for reburial in the Jewish state. Nobody can say for sure why Muyal set off from Morocco to the Brazilian Amazon in 1908. The most likely story seems to be that he was sent by Morocco's chief rabbi to touch base with the

rainforest faithful.

Moroccan Jews, mostly descendants of refugees forced from the Iberian Peninsula by the Inquisition, began immigrating to the Amazon in the early 19th century. A second wave followed with the rubber boom around the turn of the century. Numbers are difficult to pin down, but about 1,000 Moroccan Jewish families probably scattered about the Amazon during the 19th and early 20th centuries, according to journalist and historian Reginaldo Jonas Heller, author of a study about the phenomenon.

Like all travelers back then, Muyal began his Amazon expedition near the mouth of the river in the city of Belm, and worked his

way upriver. By 1910, he had traversed the nearly 1,000 miles to Manaus. Then a city of 50,000, Manaus had been developing at an “almost North American” pace during the preceding decades of the rubber boom, according to German anthropologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg, who passed through town a few years before the rabbi.

In his book “Two Years Among the Indians,” Koch-Grünberg warned of a “dangerous ‘Manaus fever,’ that nearly every year kills a quantity of foreigners.” Moyal caught something, probably yellow fever, and died on March 10, 1910. Manaus didn’t have a Jewish cemetery until the 1920s, so Moyal was buried with the gentiles in the Sao Joao Batista Municipal Cemetery. In keeping with tradition, members of the Jewish community built a small wall around the tomb. The headstone featured inscriptions in Hebrew and Portuguese.

Death by yellow fever is a gruesome affair. It’s characterized by jaundice, which causes the whites of the eyes and the skin to turn yellow, and black vomit, the dark coloring due to blood.

By all accounts, nobody really wanted to hang out at the rabbi’s deathbed — nobody except a woman named Cota Israel, who faithfully attended to Moyal until he passed away.

After the rabbi’s death, Israel developed a knack for helping people iron out kinks — muscle pulls, twisted ankles and knees, fractures and back problems. “Just a common woman, she began to treat people as would a physical therapist today,” said Isaac Dahan, a doctor who also serves as the Jewish community’s prayer leader in Manaus. When asked how she did it, Israel said she had been blessed by Moyal.

There’s no record of when Moyal himself was first credited with miracles, but members of Manaus’ Jewish community born in the 1930s remember hearing stories about him when they were children. Dozens of beneficiaries have attached plaques to the rabbi’s tomb. Most simply announce a “graca alcançada,” or miracle performed, without specifying the details. Most are not dated, but the oldest with a date is from July 18, 1975.

A few years later, around 1980, a member of Israel’s Parliament named Eliahu Moyal learned from a friend of the late miracle-performing rabbi in Brazil. Moyal determined that the man had been his long-lost uncle. He sent a letter to the Amazonas Israelite Committee in Manaus asking whether the remains could be sent to Israel for reburial. After some soul searching, community leaders regretfully denied Moyal’s request. “How could we? He’d become a saint,” Dahan said. “We can’t even move him to our cemetery nearby.”

Christians continued their pilgrimages to the tomb, lighting candles and leaving offerings. When a crack appeared in the tombstone, community leaders replaced it with an identical copy and enclosed the tomb with a fence. They also set out a small table where pilgrims could leave their candles, though many still reach inside the fence to leave their candles as close as possible to the tomb.

Many members of Manaus’ 200-family Jewish community find the phenomenon a bit curious, but they don’t begrudge the Catholics their Holy Rabbi. “Nobody can disrespect the beliefs of the city where we live,” Dahan said.

Centuries of Jewish life

by Daviot Kelly, Jamaica Gleaner, Sun. November 12, 2006



Winston Sill/Freelance Photographer Celebrating a milestone!

Members of the gathering sing psalms during the thanksgiving service for the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in Jamaica, and opening of Jamaica Jewish Heritage Centre.

The United Congregation of Israelites celebrated the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in Jamaica on Thursday November 9, marking a significant milestone in the history of a storied people.

Though some Jews can trace their history in Jamaica as far back as the time of Columbus’ arrival, their legal settlement did not

come until years later. Jews arrived in Jamaica mainly from Portugal and Spain at first to flee the persecution brought on by such events as the Spanish Inquisition. But, the island being under Spanish rule, they feared the inquisition would spread. With the take-over of the English in 1655, aided by some of these 'marranos' or 'secret Jews', their presence became more overt. By 1830, when the last discriminatory laws against Jamaica were repealed, the Jews had finally found a place where they could practise their beliefs without fear.

It is with this background that the members of the local Jewish community were joined by some of their brothers and sisters from abroad in the Synagogue Shaare Shalom on Duke Street to celebrate the milestone. Custos of Kingston, Canon Weeville Gordon representing the Governor-General and Transport Minister Robert Pickersgill who represented the Prime Minister, both lauded the Jewish community for their contribution to Jamaica. They marvelled at the number of sectors that those of Jewish descent have influenced; and how those individuals have enriched the lives of all Jamaicans.

Jewish Heritage Centre

The United Congregation also used the occasion to formally open the Jamaica Jewish Heritage Centre also located on the grounds of the synagogue. The centre holds various artefacts, literature on the history of Jews from their arrival to the present. There is also a small gift shop where you can make memorabilia your own.

The premiere authority on Jewish culture, Ainsley Henriques, said it was a special night for everyone not just Jews and marvelled that despite of our different beliefs we were drawn together "by community, by friendship, by service to each other...and by just being human."

He encouraged people of all ages to visit the centre to learn about the Jewish heritage and challenged everyone to show "how we created a nation not just out of many, one, but out of many cultures, one culture. These will be the paving stones on our national road to peace." A lignum vitae tree was planted as a symbol of life and hope for future generations.

Guests included: German Ambassador Volker Schlegel; Mexican Ambassador Leonore Rueda; Dr. Omar Davies and wife Rose; Argentine Ambassador Jose Pino; Maurice and Valerie Facey; Audrey Marks and Wallace Campbell.

Jamaica's Jewish Community Marks 350 Years

By Ben Frank, October 24, 2006, JTA



Jamaica's tiny Jewish community will soon celebrate its 350th anniversary — one year late. Some 150 to 200 Jews live on the Caribbean island of 3 million. Mostly intermarried and interracial, the community has had no rabbi for 25 years and no kosher butcher for 50. But on Nov. 9, it will mark 350 years in Jamaica and the opening of the Jamaican Jewish Heritage Center.

The event will be held in the elegant, 100-year-old Sha'are Shalom synagogue on Duke Street in Kingston. Governor General Kenneth Hall and Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller are expected to attend. The community will dedicate the center, which will be housed in a renovated building next door to the synagogue that has been used for kiddush after Shabbat services. As a multi-purpose building, the center will still hold some religious ceremonies and community gatherings. The center will house a permanent exhibition of Jamaican Jewish history, cases of Jamaican Judaica, archives, a reference department, theater and offices for the synagogue and community, most of whose members are in business.

Thousands of American Jews who visit the resorts of Montego Bay, Ocho Rios and Port Antonio rarely meet a Jamaican Jew, since nearly all of them live in Kingston, about a four-hour drive from the white beaches of the third-largest island in the Caribbean.

Jamaica played a part in founding and supporting the American Jewish community. A shipload of Jews on their way from Recife, Brazil to Holland in 1654 was waylaid by Spanish frigates. Taken to Jamaica, the Jews were held for violating the laws of the Inquisition, and were freed only when 23 of them proved they were not Marranos.

The 23 then sailed to Dutch New Amsterdam — later New York — becoming the first Jews to land in America. Over the next century, Jamaican Jewry financially aided the fledgling Jewish community in America. "It's all about survival," said American Ed Kritzler, a historian and long-time resident. "In the face of the Inquisition and always on the run from it, we settled in Jamaica and the New World, and we survived. Jamaican Jews have a strong ego that says, 'We are Jamaican Jews, we have a stake in this country and we were here before the English.'"

Former synagogue president Ainsley Henriques, whose family has been here since 1740, said the community dates its founding to the arrival of the British in 1655, when several Jews helped seize the island from the Spanish. "We waited for the completion of the Heritage Center to celebrate," said Henriques, who spearheaded the center's creation. "We don't know exactly when the first Jews arrived after the British took the island, but undoubtedly there were Marranos already living among the Spanish and native

population," he said, referring to forced converts.

By 1750, 1,000 Jews lived on the island. They saw Jamaica as a place where they could live peacefully. In the 18th century, their legal rights were better than those in many places in Europe. By 1831 Jews could hold office in Jamaica, a right not granted in England until 1858. In fact, so many Jews won elective posts here that in 1849 the Jamaican Assembly adjourned for Yom Kippur. By 1881, 2,535 Jews called Jamaica their home.

Once there were five synagogues in Jamaica. At the end of the 19th century, one-quarter of the shops in Kingston were closed on Yom Kippur. Jews were successful merchants and planters. A minority owned plantations, while others had small shops or served as intermediaries for agricultural produce. Unlike other Caribbean islands, where Jews lived in the large cities, here they settled throughout the island: in Spanish Town, Montego Bay, Savanna-la-Mar, Lucea, Port Antonio, Falmouth and Brown's Town. Today, 21 Jewish cemeteries are known to exist, but only two are actively used.

Jamaica gained independence in 1962. Many Jews left during the political unrest of the 1970s, mostly heading for Miami and Canada. Why and how do those who remained stay Jewish? "Old habits are hard to shed," said Henriques, whom the government of Israel entitled its honorary consul in Jamaica. He deals with immigration and matters affecting Israel in the absence of an ambassador.

Shabbat and holiday services, as well as life-cycle events, are held in the Kingston Synagogue, whose services are a combination of Reform and Conservative with Caribbean aspects, such as the sandy floor used in a few other synagogues in the Caribbean.

One theory behind the sand is that most of the first Jews who came to the New World had been forcibly converted to Christianity, but they remembered that when they lived under the Spanish Inquisition, they put sand on the floors of secret worship rooms to muffle the sounds of prayer.

The Jamaican Jewish community belongs to the Union of Jewish Congregations of Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the Commonwealth Jewish Council based in London.

Almost every child of a mixed marriage is accepted and brought up as a Jew, but very few Jamaican Jews read Hebrew, Henriques said. A Jewish Agency for Israel emissary will arrive in the next few months to live on the island and assist the community in Jewish education and holiday celebrations, he added.

As for the future, Henriques says, "This is a pluralistic society that respects everyone's religion, and it will be that Jamaican economic opportunity and tolerance that will ensure our survival for at least another generation."

ARTS & CULTURE

Funny, She Doesn't Look Jewish

By Jeff Fleisher, October 2006, World Jewish Digest



Since her creation in 1959, the Barbie doll has become one of the world's most popular toys, with more than a billion sold around the world. While she's adopted an assortment of occupations, physical traits and cultures in the past half-decade, Barbie started out with just one version—that of a blond-haired fashion plate living the mainstream American dream. She also started as the brainchild of Ruth Handler, the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Poland. For filmmaker Tiffany Shlain, Barbie was the perfect starting point for *The Tribe*, a short film exploring what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century.

"I knew I always wanted to do a film about Jewish identity," Shlain told World Jewish Digest. "I had known the creator of Barbie was Jewish, which I thought was one of the great ironies of pop culture. So I thought it would be a very interesting way into complicated issues of assimilation and identity, which I've wrestled with myself."

Shlain, 36, grew up in Mill Valley, just north of San Francisco, with what she calls a "culturally Jewish" upbringing. She attended High Holiday services at her family's Reform temple, went to Sunday school and had a bat mitzvah. But growing up in a diverse area without a tight-knit Jewish community, she says she didn't really feel engaged with her religion. As an adult, she didn't belong to a temple or to Jewish organizations. She explored her heritage—visiting her grandparents' former home of Odessa in the Ukraine, stopping at Auschwitz on a trip to Poland, honeymooning in Israel—but says she still wrestled with reconciling her Jewish roots and her assimilated life in America.

Then, in 2002, Shlain—also the co-founder of the popular Webby Awards honoring the world's best Web sites—was invited to the first of the now-annual weekend retreats hosted by Reboot (a nonprofit organization that brings young, creative Jews together to network and dialogue about Judaism today). Already interested in issues surrounding Jewish identity, Shlain says she was

impressed with how freely the 40 participants shared their personal stories and varying levels of comfort with their roots. She wanted to make a film that would spark similar conversations, without pushing an agenda.

As it happened, Ruth Handler died the weekend of the retreat. Shlain was struck that the obituaries failed to mention that Handler, the creator of the ultimate Shiksa doll, was Jewish. Considering it a perfect example of Jewish assimilation, Shlain realized she had found her film's hook.

Along with husband Ken Goldberg, an artist and professor of robotics at the University of California-Berkeley, Shlain started writing. The result is an 18- minute film that uses Barbie to introduce larger themes of what it means to be a Gen X or Gen Y Jew.

The film has a Heeb Magazine, hip- Jewish vibe, linking funny images and ironic humor with more serious statistics and facts about Jewish history. The visual style is fast-paced and eclectic. Themes of intermarriage and interfaith, new attitudes toward Israel and Jews vis-à-vis African-Americans, all are touched upon as falling within the range of experiences from which today's youth "roll their own" meanings of Jewishness.

Actor Peter Coyote (E.T., Jagged Edge) narrates the tongue-in-cheek script, which starts out by asking viewers to imagine the population of the earth as a tribe of 100 people. Shlain then breaks down that sample into sub-tribes, explaining it would consist of, among others, 30 Christians, 18 Muslims and one Jew, who is not even a whole person but a quarter of one, represented by a tiny red dot. From there, she points out that one member of that tribe created Barbie and adds, cutely, "All sub-tribes can agree Barbie doesn't look Jewish."

"Barbie is my shill in a way," Shlain says. "She's my way in. A lot of people see this film who would never see a film about Jewish identity, but they'll see a film about Barbie. She's a very fun pop-culture object to deconstruct. But of course, it's a 15-minute film. Our goal is for the film to be the appetizer and the main course to be the discussion afterward."

Shlain has held screenings all over the country—including the United Nations Association Film Festival—with audience participation sessions immediately afterwards. She says typical conversation topics range from what it means to "look" or "act" Jewish to new attitudes toward Israel to the differences among Jewish denominations.

To that end, the film introduces topics but does not dictate answers. At times, the narrative is fun and ironic, as when it includes a diorama of Barbie and Ken dolls in a bat mitzvah scene or when Jewish denominations from atheist to ultra-Orthodox are illustrated using Kens in tradition-specific getups.

But some of the visuals are serious, as when Shlain mixes in archival footage of buildings laced with antisemitic graffiti. Toward the end of the film, *The Tribe* even includes quick cuts of real "Jews on the street" describing their own self-definition. An attractive, stylish woman shrugs and says, "I'm unaffiliated." An earthy young woman describes herself as a "Jewess," while a 20-something hipster declares that he is a "bad Jew"—staring ironically into the camera. **Finally, New York performance artist Vanessa Hidary performs her hip-hop influenced poem Hebrew Mamita, inspired by the revulsion she felt when a guy in a bar tried to compliment her by saying that she didn't "look Jewish."**

"This is a style I've developed over my whole filmmaking career," says Shlain, who has made eight short films since 1990. "I studied avant-garde film, and my style is very experimental."

Her style works all the more because, as filmmakers from Michael Moore to Morgan Spurlock have done, Shlain balances her teasing humor with a serious undercurrent. As the narrator discusses the Diaspora, the screen shows a dandelion with the wind slowly blowing its seeds away. The next shot is a timeline of expulsions, pogroms and other attacks against Jews, from the Assyrian Exile to the Nazi Holocaust, and the viewer is overwhelmed by the sheer number. At that point, the same red dot, used to represent the tiny proportion of Jews in the world population gets cut in half.

"When we show that persecution list and the dot, you get a big gasp in the audience where they get it," Shlain says. "A lot of people, especially people of other faiths, have come up to me afterward to talk about that."

The Tribe premiered last January at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival and since then has won awards at festivals in San Francisco, Nashville and Ann Arbor, Mich. It is available for purchase at Shlain's Web site (www.TribetheFilm.com), where it comes with a short book exploring the ideas in the film, as well as a deck of "discussion cards" laden with thoughtprovoking images and words. And, of course, the site includes opportunities for people to post their reactions.

One such reaction reads, "I was brought up in a kosher Conservative Jewish home, had a bat mitzvah and then ran away from my Judaism for many years. Your work really connected me to a very new perspective. I still have not found my tribe but I would like to renew the search ... thanks for the push."

Cooking Defines Sephardic Jews at Sukkot

By Julia Moskin, October 11, 2006, *The New York Times*



Like its trees, Brooklyn's sukkahs sprout in unlikely places.

All over the borough, observant Jewish families spent the first week of October building sukkahs, outdoor rooms with open roofs, in preparation for the holiday of Sukkot, which began last Friday and ends this Friday. Perched on asphalt roofs and in concrete gardens, they will eat under the stars for a week to commemorate the Jews' biblical wanderings in the desert.

For one food-loving community within Brooklyn's sizable Jewish population, Sukkot has additional significance.

"We always cook a lot, but for Sukkot, we do even more," said Aida Hasson, who grew up in Beirut and is part of Brooklyn's tight-knit community of Middle Eastern Jews.

This network of a few hundred families shares roots in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, and also an extraordinary culinary tradition. They use the term Syrian Jews, to distinguish themselves within the larger world of the Sephardim, the Jews of the Mediterranean.

"We call ourselves Syrian, Sephardic, Middle Eastern, whatever," said Giselle Habert, who was born in Cairo. "The important thing is that we all know each other, and we all cook the same things."

This community's favorites are labor-intensive dishes that are still passed down from mother to daughter: sambusak, crisp little half-moons stuffed with allspice-scented meat or tangy white cheese; mujadara, lentils and rice cooked together and thickly piled with gold-brown strands of onion; mahshi, vegetables like tiny eggplant and finger-size zucchini stuffed with spiced meat and rice; and kahk, sesame-sprinkled rounds of crumbly pastry.

"Ours is the real, original cooking of the Jews," said Vicki Major, whose grandmother was born in Aleppo, Syria. In the Bible, she pointed out, when Esau sells his birthright, "it is for lentil soup, isn't it?"

Now spread over the world, "the community," as its members call it, is defined mostly through family and religion, but also by its distinctive food, so different from the brisket and bagels of the Ashkenazic tradition most Americans are familiar with.

Ms. Hasson is famous in the community for her typically Lebanese fruit preserves, like tiny apples cooked in sugar syrup, jellied quince paste and finely shredded and candied spaghetti squash, all traditional sweets for the first month of the Jewish year, which began at sundown on Sept. 22. "In Beirut, we all lived together, and the women cooked together all day long," she said.

"Everyone would sit down and help with the stuffing and the folding, someone would make a bowl of tabbouleh, and that way no one was alone doing all the work."

Middle Eastern cities like Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut and Alexandria all had flourishing Jewish neighborhoods for many centuries. But diasporas became common for many reasons, including the slow death of the camel-caravan economy in the 20th century, the Arab-Israeli wars and Egypt's expulsion of nearly all of its Jews between 1956 and 1967.

And so the community has slowly reconstituted itself in Los Angeles, Tel Aviv, Paris and Brooklyn, revitalizing the Sephardic neighborhood around the intersection of Kings Highway and Ocean Parkway. Population estimates for the community in Brooklyn range from 30,000 to 50,000; Brooklyn's Jewish population overall is now about 500,000, according to a 2002 study by the UJA-Federation of New York.

It is not surprising, given the repeated displacements of the centuries, that the community does not welcome attention from outsiders. But its cooking, which I first tasted at the bakeries and restaurants on Kings Highway, is so intriguing that over several months, I slowly persuaded some home cooks to open their kitchens.

Although they take their skills for granted — "I don't do anything special" is the refrain — their well-developed abilities to balance sweet and sour flavors, to weave together spices, simply to cook without recipes and put a home-cooked meal on the table virtually every night, are increasingly rare.

Sukkot is also the Jewish harvest festival, and in the community it has become a traditional time to feed 40, 60, even 100 guests

— and to set out almost that many different dishes. On the first night, my dinner began with seven different mezze, or appetizers, then continued with a green Egyptian soup called melokhia, spiked with vinegary scallions to cut its richness. It then moved on to two chickens mounded with rice and pine nut stuffing; brisket in a sweet and sour sauce; a roll of roasted kibbe (ground beef and rice) in cherry sauce; braised celery root and fennel in turmeric; and string beans with caramelized onions. For dessert, there was a plum tart, a pastry roll filled with homemade jam, and walnut-stuffed dates.

After the first two festive days, typical Sukkot meals are casseroles and stews — like sofrito batatas, a spiced veal stew with fried potatoes mixed in — that can be easily transported to the sukkah, and are warming on cold fall nights.

Like Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish women, the women of this community keep kosher kitchens, define themselves first as wives and mothers, and rarely work outside the home. But in contrast to those purposefully modest women, these women are fashionable and even glamorous, blending in on the Brooklyn streets in tank tops and French-tip manicures.

“In our community, it doesn’t matter so much what we wear,” said Fernanda Chemtob, who was born in Cairo and now lives in Brooklyn. “We know who we are.” They certainly do. Even women who have lived their whole lives in Brooklyn can taste if a cook’s roots are in Egypt or Syria, depending on whether garlic and lemon, or allspice and tomato, are more dominant in her cooking.

“We don’t like anything bland,” said Raquel Habert, one of Giselle’s daughters-in-law. “We are always adding flavor, flavor, flavor.” Florence Habert, another daughter-in-law and a new bride, shrugged off compliments on the pleating technique she uses to seal her sambusak. “You watch your mother, you watch your grandmother, you love the way it tastes, so you have to learn to do it,” she said. Developing the patience and dexterity to turn out these tiny pastries earns real respect in this community: a love for sambusak and lahmejün is like a badge of Syrian identity, and cooks say they are always the first to go at any gathering.

“If you put out a thousand sambusak, they will eat a thousand sambusak,” said Vicki Maijor, Raquel Habert’s mother.

According to Claudia Roden, an expert on Jewish cooking who grew up in the community in Cairo, brides-to-be with long fingers were especially prized — the better to make classic dishes like stuffed zucchini and kibbe, ground beef stuffed into an impossibly thin shell of bulgur wheat. The women of the community still marry young — 19 is considered an appropriate age — and are then expected to learn to cook in earnest, preferably from their new mothers-in-law, who can instruct them on their new husbands’ tastes. “When my husband’s aunts visited us, they would go straight to the kitchen,” said Iris Towers, who married into the community in the 1950’s. “It was their job to teach me to make lahmejün and make sure the freezer was full when they left.”

Among the women I met, at least part of every day is still devoted to cooking — not only that night’s dinner for her husband and children and often other relatives, but also for the engagements, circumcisions, birthdays, anniversary parties, card games and bake sales that fuel a constant cycle of entertaining and celebration.

In August, I went to one of the community’s charity bake sales, held in a private home in the town of Deal on the New Jersey shore. Members of the community have spent summers there since the 1920’s: its culinary bible, a two-volume cookbook published by the sisterhood of the local synagogue, is titled “Deal Delights.” Each summer, the community’s butchers and other vendors from Kings Highway make deliveries to Deal or move there altogether, and the men commute to work in New York City via ferry.

There were at least 200 women at the sale, buying one another’s challahs, jars of bazargan (a cracked wheat salad flavored with tamarind and pine nuts), and pistachio cookies. The bake sale went on for hours, and included seminars on how to make “Syrian cheese,” a mozzarella-like twist that is pulled into fine shreds, then eaten with olive oil and pita bread. The sale cleared almost \$75,000, estimated one community member who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the group’s strong taboos against discussing money with outsiders.

In the summer, even these demon cooks relax into a routine of grilled fish, salads and sandwiches by the pool. But as soon as they returned to Brooklyn, the women began stocking their freezers (many of them have not one but two large freezers in the basement) for autumn’s Jewish holidays. “We go from house to house for dinners and lunches,” said Shirley Mosseri, a mother of four who was born and raised in Brooklyn. “You can’t say no to food in this community,” she said as she expertly cored 20 small eggplants, removing all but the thinnest shell of purple skin, just as her grandmother had taught her.

In the community’s kitchens, there are many young women like Mrs. Mosseri — affluent, American-born, educated — who have embraced its traditional strictures instead of melting into the American middle class, with its opportunities for secular education, two-income families, and take-out for dinner four times a week.

“It took me a long time to get used to not shopping on the Sabbath, not watching TV, not driving, but now I like it,” said Mrs. Mosseri, who attended a secular school and finished college.

Those who have taken steps away from the community criticize its conformity, its increasing religiosity, and its harsher traditions. An unmarried woman of 29, one lapsed member told me, is considered worthy of only a decrepit or widowed groom. But for those who remain, cooking — and, of course, endlessly talking about food — cements their ties to one another and to the past.

“You want to make it perfect, just like your grandmother did,” Raquel Habert said. “There’s nothing in the world I’d rather be doing than this.”

The Last Jews of Baghdad

By George Robinson, November 3, 2006, The Jewish Week



No one is left. There simply are no more Jews in Baghdad. But once there was a thriving Jewish population in the Iraqi capital, perhaps as many as a third of its population, and they had a vital, vibrant musical tradition dating back, some say, to Babylonia and the days when that fabled city was the global center of Jewish life.

Iraqi Jews may have been forced to abandon their homes in that country, but they never abandoned the culture they created there. Yair Dalal, one of the world’s great oud players, is still a bearer of the musical traditions of Baghdad and when he performs on Saturday, Nov. 4, as part of a four-day conference “Back to Babylon: 2600 Years of Jewish Life in Iraq,” he will be passing that culture along for another generation, much as he does when he teaches one of the many workshops that fill his working calendar.

That is only fair since, as he readily acknowledges, his own knowledge of that music came from studying the Jewish-Iraqi musicians who came before him. “I was strongly influenced by the Judeo-Arab music ... that I was exposed to from a very early age in my neighborhood and at my parents’ house and, of course, at the synagogue,” he says.

When most of the Jews were expelled from Iraq in the 1950s they brought their culture with them, especially their music, and Dalal, who was born in Israel in 1955, listened carefully to the many master musicians who made the journey to the Jewish state. “I used to go visit and listen to them,” he recalls. “I still do and I have learned a great deal from them.”

But Dalal is not merely a vessel for preserving tradition. His music blends many other influences besides the Iraqi/Babylonian traditions. Francesco Spagnolo, a prominent ethnomusicologist and the executive director of the American Sephardi Federation, places Dalal’s unique musical hybrid into a larger context.

“Dalal’s music is a very important piece in the panoply of Israeli music as it develops into the 21st century,” Spagnolo wrote in an e-mail last week. “In his work, Dalal has been successful both in preserving the Iraqi tradition he was born into, and in interweaving it with an array of Jewish and non-Jewish influences.”

That musical tapestry makes Dalal a fine example of how Israeli music has evolved since the early days of the Jewish state. “[T] his trajectory really represents a main path in Israeli music after the initial creative impetus of the early generations of pioneers: looking back at the roots, learning from the “fathers” (and the mothers), and integrating traditional sounds into a new repertoire, a repertoire that can speak to wide audiences,” Spagnolo wrote.

Asked about the synthesis of other musical traditions within his music, Dalal speaks in terms of emotions and passions. “It’s all about people and keeping my mind and soul open, and I use my large musical knowledge to connect with different styles of music,” he says.

Spagnolo, approaching Dalal’s music from a more analytical point of view, wrote, “Dalal’s case is . . . unique, in the sense that the music he preserves and offers to his audience is the music that the early generations of pioneers (mainly of Ashkenazi origins) did not acknowledge at first in their cultural equation: the great musical traditions of the Jews from the Islamic world. Iraqi-Jewish music, in particular, is an essential component of these traditions.

“Without the ‘Arabic’ sounds of the Iraqi Jewish musicians who immigrated to Israel since the early 1950s, Israeli music today would not include its Middle Eastern components, which are instead evident in the popular scene (musiqah mizrahit), in the world

music scene, as well as in the realm of art music. Dalal is not only an heir to their musicianship because he is of Iraqi descent: he has studied with them, and preserves their attitudes to music in his art.”

Although he is a highly educated musician and clearly not a mere “natural” who goes by instinct alone, Dalal invariably focuses on the expressive capacities of his music. When he talks about the Babylonian tradition, he refers to its “deep roots that contain sacred music and secular music, special and unique scales and rhythms that aim to express emotions, thoughts and moods.”

Seen from that perspective, it should come as no surprise that Dalal is a prominent peace activist as well. One of the workshops he leads regularly is titled “Music as a Means for Social Change: Know Your Neighbor’s Culture.”

“I just believe in global peace, and that music has the power to bring people together by sharing [their] humanity [through] the common language that is music,” he says. Ironically, Dalal has never visited the city whose musical heritage he so richly conveys. He would like to see Baghdad someday in the future, but for now he can only watch with dismay the destruction being visited on his parents’ country.

Asked about the Iraq war, he is somber. “I feel strongly about the Iraqi people, that they are good people and deserve to live in peace,” he says. “I feel close to them, because we share the same tradition.”

BOOK REVIEWS

Jewish Tales: Key to Chinese Success

By Tali Raveh, October 2006, YNetNews.com

The Chinese have been asking themselves why so many Jews are so successful, and they believe they have found the answer. That answer is being presented in a children’s series of 10 books called *The Secret to the Jews’ Success*. Each book tells a short Jewish tale alongside the moral of the story, teaching the Chinese how to succeed in life. One of the tales tells the story of a large farm where a young Jewish worker is also employed. The young Jew works very hard and completes his work within two hours. When coming to receive his pay the other workers complain that they had spent the entire day working while the Jew had only worked for two hours. The owner of the farm says he is not interested in the hours of work but rather in the production. The moral of the story is that the Jews succeed due to their perseverance and hard work, and therefore it is recommended to follow in their footsteps and not be lazy.

Respect your elders

Another tale unfolds the plight of a young man whose disappointed father bequeathed all he had to his servant, while the son is allowed to choose just one thing. Turning to his rabbi for an explanation the son is told that his father did the right thing because had the father not bequeathed his property to the servant the servant may have never shown him the will. The rabbi also tells him that the one thing he should choose is the servant – this way everything will ultimately be his. The moral of the story is that the Jews are smart because they respect their elders and take advantage of their knowledge.

Another tale reaches the conclusion that the Jews’ developed thought process enables them to resolve problems by analytical thinking. Yet another story tells how the Jews don’t take any work lightly; how they cooperate with each other and how they are willing to sacrifice themselves.

Professor Aaron Shai a lecturer on East Asian Studies at the Tel Aviv University says he is not in the least bit surprised by these books, “the Chinese have always held us in high esteem,” he says. Jews first settled in China after the destruction of the first temple. In the 19th century Jews also arrived from Iraq and became highly successful. At the turn of the 20th century a wave of anti-communist Jews arrived in China from Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution, among them was the prime minister’s family. In the 30’s, Jewish refugees such as Saul Eisenberg who fled the Nazi regime, came to China and went on to become very successful.

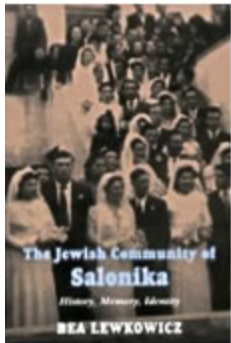
Admiration for the Jews

Shai says the encounter with these successful Jews led to the Chinese admiration for them. Another reason for their admiration, he adds, is the similarity between the dispersion of the Jews and the Chinese around the world. Both communities are dispersed throughout five continents and both are highly successful in commerce, and very particular about their children’s education. The similarity between the Jews’ family honor and the Confucius heritage also created admiration for the Jews.

So far, 5,000 books have been published in China and they are highly popular among Christian Chinese communities. Wai Wan, a high school teacher says that had the publisher invested more in advertising the books they would have been even more popular. Wan says the books are relatively more expensive than other Chinese children’s books.

Greek Tragedy: Two New Books Offer a Window Into the History of Salonica's Jewish Community

By Sarah Abrevaya Stein, August 25, 2006, Forward.com



The Jewish Community of Salonika: History, Memory, Identity By Bea Lewkowicz Vallentine Mitchell, 266 pages, \$35.

Traditions & Customs of the Sephardic Jews of Salonica By Michael Molho Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 432 pages, \$29.95.

The German occupation of Greece, begun in April 1941, was accompanied by organized plunder, rampant inflation and a famine in Athens in the winter of 1941 to 1942 that claimed at least 300,000 lives — all before the deportations of Greek Jews to the Nazi death camps had even begun.

In Salonica, known to its Jewish inhabitants as “Mother of Israel,” the early years of German occupation were marked by the expropriation of communal properties, the ransacking of communal treasures and, in July 1942, the public humiliation of the city’s Jewish male population — numbering roughly 10,000 — in Eleftheria (Freedom) Square. By December 1942, the German authorities were planning the deportation of 50,000 Jews from Salonica and the demolition of the city’s 500-year-old Jewish cemetery. At the same time, and “in spite of the rigorous cold,” a man named Michael Molho “passed these days in the cemetery, meticulously copying and preserving historic inscriptions, before the gravestones were destroyed and scattered through the city.”

Born in Salonica in 1890, Rabbi Molho was descended from a line of distinguished rabbis and was himself trained at Salonica’s Bet Yosef rabbinical seminary. After the death of his father, Molho was obliged to interrupt his rabbinical career; in the 1920s, he opened what would become one of the most important textile factories in Greece. At the same time, he became secretary general of the main Zionist organization in Greece, edited a popular Ladino daily, and independently began conducting research and producing scholarship on the history of Jewish Salonica. Among his early forays into this topic was his study of the extraordinary Jewish cemetery in Salonica, which once held hundreds of thousands of graves. The library he gathered, looted by the German occupying forces in April 1941, contained more than 500 rare volumes.

Molho himself managed to escape German-occupied Greece for the Italian-occupied eastern coast, his unpublished manuscripts and documentation in tow. There, and in the mountain town of Kieramidi, he waited out the war with the help of the Greek resistance. In late 1945, Molho was installed as chief rabbi of the Jewish community of Salonica. Five years later, he dolefully left his hometown, where the Jewish community was but a shadow of its former self, to assume a rabbinical position in Buenos Aires.

Molho’s dedication to recording the history of Salonican Jewry is astonishing not only because of his prescience and doggedness but also in light of the Sephardic cultural climate of this period. In interwar Eastern Europe, Jewish intellectuals embarked on a concerted effort to study, document and preserve elements of Jewish life, the Yiddish language among them; arguably the greatest achievement of this circle was the creation of the Yiddish Scientific Institute, in Vilna, in 1925. In the Sephardic heartland of Southeastern Europe, no parallel intellectual or academic movement existed. Molho was not without peer: One of the most important historical sources on the history of Salonican Jewry, Joseph Nehama’s magisterial, seven-volume “Histoire des Israélites de Salonique” (World Sephardi Federation, 1959) was also begun in the interwar period. Still, Nehama and Molho labored largely alone, without the support of a formal institution, without formal training, without colleagues or financial assistance, and amid a climate in which the defense of Ladino and other markers of Sephardic difference was subdued if not nonexistent.

The fruits of Molho’s labors, published originally in articles and in the Spanish-language “Usos y Costumbres de los Sefardies de Salónica” (Instituto Arias Montano, 1950) — a work originally drafted in French — have been gathered and published for the first time as “Traditions & Customs of the Sephardic Jews of Salonica.” This is an invaluable volume for scholars and lay readers alike: a precious, marvelously translated ethnography with superb introductions by Robert Bedford. Molho offers the finest grained details of everyday life in Jewish Salonica otherwise lost to most contemporary readers: the games played by its children; the cures used to treat baldness and skin conditions; the measures employed to promote weaning; the rituals enacted to mark birth, circumcision, marriage and death. Viewed alongside a number of other recent works on Jewish life in Salonica, the translation and republication of Molho’s volume reflect an exciting surge of scholarly interest in the history and culture of this unique Jewish

community.

While it was Ottoman and before it was Greek, Salonica was a Jewish city, among very few centers in Europe in which Jews constituted the majority population. Since the 16th century, Jews dominated nearly every niche of Salonica's robust commercial life, transforming the city into a center of Jewish learning and shaping the cultural fabric of the place as a whole. By the outset of the 20th century, Salonica, still under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire, remained more Jewish than it was Greek or Turkish, with Jews numbering 80,000 of 150,000 city dwellers. Passing through the city's streets, one was more likely to hear Ladino — or Judeo-Spanish, which for some five centuries was the mother tongue of the vast majority of Southeastern European Jews — than any other language.

A diverse Jewish presence in the city preceded the arrival of refugees fleeing Spain and Portugal in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. A native Jewish community (the Romaniots) had lived there since early Roman rule, when Salonica was the pre-eminent metropolis between the Adriatic and Black Sea. Under Byzantine rule, the city absorbed Jews from Hungary and Provence, with each individual creating his or her own community and maintaining an individual language, liturgy and culture. Thousands of Sicilian and Venetian Jews settled in the city when it was sold to Venice in the early 15th century, just before it came — for the second and final time — under the rule of the expanding and increasingly powerful Ottoman Empire.

It was under Ottoman rule that the ethnic composition of Salonican Jewry came to assume the form it would take for the next five centuries, since roughly 20,000 Jews of Spanish and Portuguese descent flooded the port city between 1493 and 1536. In great part because of the commercial dexterity of this population, and because of an Ottoman political and legal system that encouraged Jews' autonomy and advancement, Salonica was poised to re-emerge as an entrepôt between Europe and the Middle East and as the Jewish cultural center of the Balkans. Not coincidentally, Salonica was also a cosmopolitan city extraordinaire; its residents were Muslim, Jewish and Christian; multi-lingual, multisectarian and multicultural — all at a time when these identities and phenomena were not only tolerated but also sanctioned by the state. So many of the forces that would shape the Sephardic world in the ensuing centuries touched Salonica first. There was, in 1655, the arrival of the false messiah Sabbetai Zevi, whose teachings, condemnation by the rabbinic authorities, and eventual apostasy sparked a Jewish spiritual crisis across Europe and the Middle East. There was the astronomic rise and eventual implosion of the Ottoman textile industry, which fueled the Jewish economy in the empire as a whole and that of Salonica in particular. (The unraveling of this industry would, in time, signal the erosion of both the empire's vitality and the mutually beneficial relationship between Ottoman Jewry and the state.) There was, in 1873, the creation of the first Alliance Israélite Universelle school in the city. Founded by French Jewish philanthropists, the AIU created educational institutions throughout the Sephardic cultural world, training generations of Jewish children in the educational, political and linguistic image of the Franco-Jewish bourgeoisie and thereby signaling and ushering in the widespread Westernization of the Jewish Levant. In a wonderful twist of historical irony, there was the childhood of Mustafa Kemal, boy of cosmopolitan Salonica and future "father" of modern Turkey, who, as much as anyone else in the region, would come to symbolize the power of nationalism in the 20th century.

Salonica was more than a metaphor: It was an idiosyncratic city with a Jewish culture influenced by the demographic, commercial and intellectual prominence of its Jewish community. In Molho's rendering, Salonica was so densely Jewish that when a Jewish couple wed, the calls of the combidador (whose job it was to invite guests to the event) would lead "all the mothers of the neighborhood... [to] put their heads out of doors and windows, exchanging with each other details of the personalities of the bride and groom and their families. Discussions and commentaries stretched out in such a way that often, the matron would go back into her kitchen to find out that she had burnt the dinner." In the early years of the 20th century, Jewish Salonica was marked by all the diversity, discord and dynamism one would hope to find in a thriving community.

The erasure of Jewish Salonica, too, is a metaphor for European and Sephardic Jewry writ large, though in some ways this erasure was even more complete in Salonica than elsewhere in Europe. Just five years after the creation of the state of New Greece, in 1912, a horrific fire centered in the Jewish neighborhood devastated Salonica. The conflagration left 54,000 Jews homeless, destroying almost every Jewish school, synagogue, house of prayer, cultural center, literary circle, library and learning center in the city. Amid a climate of nationalism, the urban planning that followed pushed Jews to outlying areas of the city. Five years later, a compulsory population exchange between Greece and Turkey brought nearly 1 million ethnic Greeks to Greece, with many settling in Salonica. The city tripled in size, and Jews were reduced from majority to minority population. Even before the genocide of Greek Jewry, then, the history and physical traces of Salonican Jewry were being erased.

As was true in most of Europe, it was the Holocaust that served as the death knell for Salonican Jewry. Despite the efforts of the Greek (and Greek Jewish) resistance, the metropolis could claim a higher percentage of Jewish victims than any other single European locale (98%). In the aftermath of the Holocaust, though a Jewish community remained in the city, Salonica ceased to be a cultural or demographic center of the Jewish world.

Bea Lewkowicz's "The Jewish Community of Salonika" is in some sense inspired by the lacuna that Jewish Salonica became. Utilizing an anthropological approach, Lewkowicz ponders how the history of Salonican Jewry has been remembered and represented in individual narratives and in the realm of communal memory — both by Jews in present-day Salonica and in what Lewkowicz calls the "memory-scape" of contemporary Greece. These are ambitious goals, but the resulting work does not entirely

succeed in distinguishing itself from the complex theoretical literature on which it relies. This is in part because of Lewkowicz's impulse not to press her subjects or critically analyze their stories, particularly when it comes to uncomfortable narratives of the Holocaust. In response to these, Lewkowicz "decided that silence was the most appropriate response." The alternative would no doubt be more trying for the researcher but more rewarding for the reader; alas, the fact that Lewkowicz "did not probe or set out to challenge the interviewees' narratives" results in a somewhat flaccid study.

Molho's study is also restrained when it comes to critical analysis, but, given the time and place in which his study was begun and Molho's own fragmented professional background, this is rather more forgivable. One strain of interpretation in "Traditions & Customs" is Molho's discomfort with the secularization and cultural dilution of early-20th-century Salonican Jewry. In describing a typical circumcision ceremony, for example, Molho dwells on the festive mood of the event — detailing the ubiquitous presence of Bonna la Tanyedora, a musician "popular with the women" and well known within the Salonican Jewish community — ending his account with this bittersweet lament: "Sadly, the tradition is now lost. Our era is a sad one! One can no longer see the unrestrained humor and joy that pervaded these occasions, at the namings from our parents' generation." Molho's unease with the breakdown of Salonican tradition — brought on, in his account, both by the erosion of Sabbath rituals and by the proliferation of cafés, cinemas and other places of leisure in the city — neglects the many new forms of cultural vivacity that dynamized Salonican Jewry in the early years of the century: the Zionist and socialist circles, the Ladino and French newspapers and novellas geared for Jewish readers, the growing educational and professional opportunities for young Jewish women, and so on.

And yet, perhaps what is most striking about Molho's study is the rarity of these bouts of nostalgia and the richness of his attention to the quotidian details of life. The result can border on poetry, as does Molho's description of the passage of the rubi (schoolmaster or melammed) through town:

"Sometimes, one of his customers would offer him by way of breakfast, a taral, a kind of biscuit, that he would moisten in water or raki. This short halt and restorative light snack, although frugal, permitted the elderly teacher to continue his journey with more vigor. One could see the poor man crossing through the streets of the neighborhood at a light pace, with the flaps of his antari [vest] blowing in the wind, exposing by the speed of his pace part of his white trousers. Behind him, the extreme edge of his giube or caftan danced and snapped at his heels, raising clouds of dust."

Contemporary scholars of Jewish Salonica are also chasing after clouds of dust: not only because the community they study fell prey to genocide but also because even before the Second World War, the Jews of Salonica were in the throes of such dramatic change. Fortunately, the recent burst of excellent scholarship onto this community allows us to appreciate Jewish Salonica as a nuanced and elastic entity. Within this pool, Molho's account stands alone. Rather like scholar Lucy Dawidowicz's breathless description of interwar Vilna, delivered by a brilliant American student abroad, "Traditions & Customs" is more than scholarship (or, perhaps, is scholarship at its best): It is accolade and eulogy in one; alive, nuanced and infectious.

Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews

By Stephen Spector, Oxford University Press 2005. 279 pp.



"Operation Solomon" was one of the most remarkable rescue efforts in modern history, in which more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel in little more than a day. Now, in this riveting volume, Stephen Spector offers the definitive account of this incredible story, based on over 200 interviews and exclusive access to confidential documents. Written with the pace and immediacy of a novel, here is the dramatic story of the rescue of the dark-skinned Jews of Ethiopia. Spector recounts how 20,000 Jews were willingly lured from their ancestral villages to Addis Ababa, expecting to be taken quickly from there to the Holy Land. Instead, they became pawns in a struggle between the Israeli government and Ethiopia's repressive dictator, who tried to coerce Israel to sell him weapons he needed in a losing war against rebel armies. In the resulting stalemate, the Jewish community was forced to live for nearly a year in squalid hovels, vulnerable to the dangers of the city, including crime and HIV. Worse yet, the

imminent collapse of Addis Ababa, with the rebels closing in on the capital, raised the threat of bloody street fighting or even a genocidal attack on the Jews, a small minority in a nation that is primarily Christian and Moslem. Spector describes the tense negotiations among Israelis, Ethiopians, and Americans, which became increasingly urgent as time ran low and the danger mounted. And he highlights the secret deals and sudden setbacks that nearly aborted the mission at the eleventh hour, even as Israeli jets sat on the runway in Ethiopia, waiting to take the Jews to the land for which they had yearned for generations. Recounting the full story for the first time, Operation Solomon is a stirring account of a heroic rescue achieved in the face of daunting odds.

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