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Hag Sameach

May you be blessed during Purim

Rabson Wuriga, Ph.D., Lemba, South Africa

Mazel Tov!

Mazel Tov to Shari and Avishai Mekonen on the birth of their son, Ariel.

Dear Family and Friends,

With great happiness we welcome Ariel Eitan Kokove Mekonen, born on March 14, 2005 at 5:48 pm in New York City. Thank you for all of your warm wishes, and we hope you are all doing well!

Love, Shari and Avishai

Great News from Esmé E. Berg

Director, American Sephardi Federation, New York

I just wanted to let you know about a wonderful and unexpected result of your recent conference in San Francisco. While I was there, I had the pleasure of meeting Ahron Yitzchak from Spain. Since we returned home, we have remained in contact through email. Ahron is originally from Murcia, Spain. A few days ago, I had a call from the office of Congresswoman Nita Lowey. One of her constituents wanted to donate a Sefer Torah to Murcia, Spain and did not know how to go about it. I remembered that Ahron is working with that community and I put them in touch. The great news is that the Inwood Hebrew Congregation in Westchester, New York will be donating the Sefer Torah to Agudat Sefarad.

Happy Purim.

The Forgotten Refugees

West Coast Movie Premiere Presented by JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East & North Africa)

Sunday, May 1, 2005 5:00 pm Cost: \$5.00

Jewish Community Center of San Francisco – Kanbar Hall

The Forgotten Refugees, a film by The David project, tells the story of the nearly one million Jews who today quietly carry the memory of a destroyed civilization. Personal stories of refugees are interspersed with dramatic archival footage, including the dramatic archival footage, including the dramatic rescue of Jews from Yemen and Iraq. Beginning at 4:00 pm there will be a fundraising reception held in honor of Joe Abdel Wahed, founding member of JIMENA. For more information contact Emily L. Blanck at 415-977-7407 or at eblanck@jimena.org.

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The Vanishing Jews of the Arab World

Baghdad Native Tells the Story of Being a Middle East Refugee

Semha Alwaya

The San Francisco Chronicle

Sunday, March 6, 2005

In discussions about refugees in the Middle East, a major piece of the narrative is routinely omitted, and my life is part of the tapestry of what's missing. I am a Jew, and I, too, am a refugee. Some of my childhood was spent in a refugee camp in Israel (yes, Israel). And I am far from being alone.

This experience is shared by hundreds of thousands of other indigenous Jewish Middle Easterners who share a similar background to my own. However, unlike the Palestinian Arabs, our narrative is largely ignored by the world because our story -- that of some 900,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries dispossessed by Arab governments -- is an inconvenience for those who seek to blame Israel for all the problems in the Middle East.

Our lives in the Israel of the 1950s were difficult. We had no money, no property; there were food shortages, few employment prospects. Israel was a new and poor country with very limited resources. It absorbed not only hundreds of thousands of us, but also an equal number of survivors of Hitler's genocide. We lived in dusty tents in "transit camps," their official name because these were to be temporary, not permanent.

Housing was eventually built for us, we became Israeli citizens, and we ceased being refugees. The refugee camps in Israel that I knew as a child were phased out, and no trace of them remains. Israel did this without receiving a single cent from the international community, relying instead on the resourcefulness of its citizens and donations from Diaspora Jewish communities. Today, many of Israel's top leaders are from families that were forced to flee Arab countries, and we make up more than half of Israel's Jewish population.

I was born in Baghdad, and like most other Iraqis, my mother tongue is Arabic. My family's cuisine, our mannerisms, our outlook, are all strongly influenced by our synthesized Judeo-Arabic culture. There once was a vibrant presence of nearly 1 million Jews residing in 10 Arab countries. Our Middle Eastern Jewish culture existed long before the Arab world dominated and rewrote the history of the Middle East. Today, however, fewer than 12,000 Jews remain in these lands -- almost none in Iraq.

What happened to us, the indigenous Jews of the Arab world? Why were 150,000 Iraqi Jews -- my family included -- forced out of Iraq? Why were an additional 800,000 Jews from nine other Arab countries also compelled to leave after 1948? When the world of the 1930s and '40s was divided between the democratic Allies and the Fascist Axis, Arab nationalists in Iraq and Palestine chose to form an alliance with Nazi Germany. The father of Palestinian nationalism and the mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Husseini, began his close collaboration with Nazi Germany in the mid-1930s.

The British put out an arrest warrant for the pro-Nazi Palestinian leader, but he escaped when war broke out in Europe in the spring of 1939. Later that year, he arrived in Baghdad and linked up with pro-Nazi Iraqi nationalist Rashid Ali al-Gaylani. In 1941 al-Husseini and al-Gaylani engineered a pro-German coup against the pro-British Iraqi government, which brought a reign of terror to Iraq's Jews. This culminated in what we remember as the Farhud, an Arabic word akin to "pogrom."

In a two-day period Arab mobs went on a rampage in Baghdad and elsewhere in Iraq, murdering, raping and pillaging these cities' Jewish communities. Nearly 200 Jews were killed, more than 2,000 injured; some 900 Jewish homes were destroyed and looted, as were hundreds of Jewish-owned shops. My father was a survivor of the carnage. He hid in a hole dug in the ground to save his life. He saw Iraqi soldiers pull small children away from their parents and rip the arms off young girls to steal their bracelets. He saw pregnant women being raped and their stomachs cut open. Britain eventually regained control, but al-Husseini and other Palestinian nationalists had already fled to Berlin where they became honored guests of the Nazi state. Hitler told a grateful al-Husseini that "Germany's only remaining objective in the [Middle East] would be limited to the annihilation of the Jews living under British protection in Arab lands."

Later, in a speech over Radio Berlin's Arabic Service, al-Husseini voiced support for the Nazis' "Final Solution" and became the first Arab leader to call openly for the expulsion of Jews from Arab lands -- some eight years before there was a single Palestinian refugee. Even though Hitler lost the war, al-Husseini's call was heeded. In 1948, Iraq rounded up and imprisoned hundreds of Jews. Others were removed from their jobs in the civil service, business licenses of Jews were revoked, and quotas were placed on Jewish high school and college students. Later, discriminatory restrictions were imposed on Jewish travel abroad and the buying or selling of property. Thus, even if Jews wanted to escape Iraq, they could not do so legally, and they could not liquidate their assets. In 1950, the Iraqi parliament passed a law called Ordinance for the Cancellation of Iraqi Nationality for Jews, Law No. 1 that stripped Iraqi Jews of their citizenship. In 1951, the Iraqi parliament passed another law, confiscating all Jewish property. Within a year, most of Iraq's ancient Jewish population, my family included, fled to Israel.

Elsewhere in the Arab world, Jews faced similar circumstances. In Libya in 1945, nearly 100 Jews were massacred. In 1948, the Jewish communities of Aden and Algeria were rocked by a series of attacks that left hundreds dead and many more injured. Discriminatory laws against Jews were passed in other Arab countries. Within a decade, the exodus of Jews from Arab countries was almost complete, with most going to Israel. All of this was conducted under the guise of law by Arab governments. This forced Jews to flee lands where we had lived for thousands of years before the Arab-Islamic conquests.

Since 1949, the United Nations has passed more than 100 resolutions on Palestinian refugees. Yet, for Jewish refugees from Arab countries not a single U.N. resolution has been introduced recognizing our mistreatment or calling for justice for the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees forced out of our homes. This imbalance of the world's concern is itself an injustice. Arab governments instituted policies that led to nearly 900,000 Middle Eastern Jews becoming stateless refugees. Those same governments forced about 750,000 Palestinian refugees and their descendants to remain in impoverished refugee camps, refusing them citizenship and denying them hope. Peace between Israel and the Arab world requires a solution that recognizes that there were two refugee populations. Acknowledging and redressing the legitimate rights of Jewish refugees from Arab countries will promote the cause of justice, peace and a true reconciliation.

Semha Alwaya is an attorney in the Bay Area and a founding member of Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (www.jimena-justice.org). E-mail us at insight@sfchronicle.com.

Featured Articles List

Oral History Project Illuminates Turkey's Forgotten Jewish Past

By Yigal Schleifer

JTA Email Edition

February 6, 2005

As Ida Sarfetti tells it, her grandfather, Nesim Krispin, was a regular Jew with an extraordinary tale. Now, thanks to a new oral history project, everyone can learn that tale. Hailing from the city of Edirne, near Turkey's border with Bulgaria, Krispin had a farm and dairy barns near the Bulgarian city of Varna. Riding there one day on horseback, Krispin was kidnapped by bandits, who blindfolded him and took him to a cave. When they took off the blindfold, Krispin stood there amazed. "Everywhere were chests and jars filled with jewelry and food," Sarfetti, 84, recounts. "They sat him down in front of a fire and gave him yogurt to eat."

It quickly turned out that the bandits were looking for someone else and let Krispin go, but not before stealing his money, watch and a prized golden ring. When he finally returned home, he was a "wreck," unable to get out of bed for several days, telling his family that he only had a cold. Some time later, the grandfather spotted a familiar man repairing a wagon in the Edirne bazaar. Recognizing the man as one of the bandits who kidnapped him, Krispin ran to the police, who arrested the outlaw. After a beating, the bandit took them to the cave where Sarfetti's grandfather had been kept captive. "Well, it turned out to be the" hideout of the "infamous 31 Gang, the most notorious group of murderers and thieves around," Sarfetti, who today lives in Istanbul, says. "Grandfather got back his ring, and in time gave it to his grandson, who bore his name," she says.

Sarfetti's colorful tale is one of several that have already emerged from interviews that are part of a Jewish oral history project recently launched in Turkey. The program's initiators, Istanbul's Ottoman-Turkish Sephardic Culture Research Center and the Vienna-based Centropa: the Central Europe Center for Research and Documentation, plan to collect the interviews — along with old

photographs — in a Web-based archive they hope will both help preserve Turkish Jewish culture and offer a window into the life of this historic but insular community.

"The life experience of Turkish Jews is completely different than in Eastern Europe. They were not affected by the Holocaust, but there were enormous events that shaped the way they look at the world," says Edward Serotta, a photographer and writer who is Centropa's founder and director. "When you read these stories, you say to yourself with a chuckle and a smile, 'This sure ain't Warsaw,'" Serotta adds while on a recent visit to Istanbul for the first of a series of training seminars for the project's interviewers. Centropa got its start in 1999, when Serotta was in Romania producing a segment about the Jewish community there for the television program "Nightline." While working in Romania, he realized that little was being done to document the lives of the Jews who remained in Central and Eastern Europe after the Holocaust. He also realized that many of the communities where these Jews lived had treasure troves of photos and other memorabilia that, in their own way, could help recreate the Jewish world that existed before World War II.

Today, Centropa is active in 13 countries, with more than 100 people working on collecting people's stories and memories before they disappear. With its Witness to a Jewish Century project, Centropa now has an online database that contains some 5,000 photographs and 460 interviews, although it may eventually feature close to 100,000 photos. The database — www.centropa.org — is also searchable, allowing visitors to look up family names, places and even search through the photographs by category, inquiring only about those, for example, that are of weddings or holiday celebrations. Over the last few years, Centropa had begun collecting material from the small Sephardi communities that remained in Balkan countries such as Serbia and Bulgaria. But for Serotta, working in Turkey was a logical and tantalizing next step.

"What makes this community fascinating is that this is the largest original Spanish exile community in the world," he says. "Here you have Jews living in the same neighborhoods, the same city, that they have lived in for 500 years." Turkey's Jewish community is especially appealing for an oral history project, says Margalit Bejarano, director of the oral history division at the Institute of Contemporary Judaism at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. "This is a culture that better preserved oral culture," she says. "They don't write everything, but the family culture and organizational culture is enriched by things that are passed down orally from one generation to the next, even through music or sayings."

The big task for Serotta was getting the Turkish Jewish community interested in the project. Although Turkey's 25,000-member community is well integrated into Turkish society, it also keeps a low profile. In many ways, the customs, traditions and even history of the country's Jews are a mystery to most Turks. Serotta first approached the community's leadership about the project in 2000, but only got the green light last year after the creation of the Ottoman-Turkish Sephardic Culture Research Center, Centropa's Turkish partner.

Karen Gerson Sarhon, the center's director, says the Jewish community realized the importance of collecting its history for an archive that could be used by future generations. Gerson Sarhon, who is also a member of Turkey's best-known Ladino musical group, says she hopes the project's team of interviewers — mostly amateur historians who are being trained by Centropa — will collect up to 200 oral histories. The big challenge, she says, will be getting people to open up and tell the interviewers everything they want to hear, since the discussion of certain topics in Turkish Jewish history — the expulsion of Jews from the city of Edirne in 1934, a wealth tax against Jews and other minority communities in the 1940s — has long been taboo.

But Gerson Sarhon says she believes there is a new openness in Turkey that might make it easier for people to talk. "Twenty years before, we might not have had anyone talking. Things have changed now," she says. "A lot of things have been written about recently and talked about on TV. It's the perfect time to do it." So far, only a handful of interviews have been conducted, mostly as a way for the interviewers to hone their skills before the project kicks into high gear. But Serotta says the early interviews, like the one with Ida Sarfetti, have people in Centropa's offices shaking their heads with delight. "This is a whole world that hasn't been shared before," Serotta says. "And now they are willing to do that."

Featured Articles List

Israel at Heart Teaches Students About Unity

By Desiree Dounel
The Night News Queens College
Tuesday, March 15, 2005

Israel at Heart members pose in the QC Hillel for a group photo. Hebrew words flowed out of the mouths of several Ethiopian visitors. Ethiopian, black visitors came into the Hillel on Feb. 28 to remind Queens College students that yes, there is a Jewish black community. In America, one seldom sees an Ethiopian Jew, who often are mistaken for someone else. "In Israel, I am treated more as an Israeli than as an Ethiopian," said Nevo Vandimo, who migrated to Israel with his family in 1987. "In the States, if you're a black man, you're just a black man."

Ethiopian law students Aviva Cohen and Nevo Vandimo, along with lawyer Abaynesh Tessema, spoke with Queens College students as part of an Israel-to-U.S. tour in celebration of Black History Month. Nearly 100 students attended the event, and the audience consisted of mostly Jewish students and some black students. Einav Dahari, 27, a Jewish Agency Israel Fellow at Hillel organized the event through Israel at Heart. The lawyers and future lawyers' mission was not political, but the team attempted to show the right way to interpret the debacle and devastation in the Middle East that one often hears about in the media.

Ethiopian black Jews began migrating over 20 years ago to Israel after the nation elected to accept them under its international campaign to attract Jews from around the world. Many Ethiopians migrated from villages before settling in modern cities throughout Israel. Most assimilated successfully, and their population there is over 105,000. Vandimo, 28, told students that for several months, he lived in Harlem and experienced first-hand the discrimination that African-Americans face. Founder of Israel at Heart Joey Low added, "Here, you have Israel that everyone accuses of being racist and they are fighting to bring black people. They [Ethiopia] can say we are the first people to leave our own country not for slavery but for a different purpose."

A panel discussion led to a question and answer session, where students and faculty asked about being a lawyer in Israel and what it is like for the Ethiopian law students to study there. Students were most interested in learning about their Ethiopian culture and heritage and how Israeli culture is different. Hillel Jewish Campus Service Corps fellow Keren Leiby asked Vandimo if the Ethiopian community sticks together and if its members have any sect-particular customs. Leiby referred to several Jewish sects that don't let members from other Jewish sects inside their own. Vandimo answered that Ethiopians in Israel are integrated. They are more like a nation rather than separate entities that merely coexist. Because the Ethiopians were unable to provide many details about Ethiopian culture, it became clear that Israeli culture has become their own.

According to the program Web site, Israel at Heart is a "not-for-profit organization, whose single concern is the well-being of Israel. We wish to do everything we can to promote a better understanding of Israel and its people." Cohen's goal was to ensure that students see Israel as more than just a place where suicide bombers tear apart the country. Israel at Heart specifically travels to college campuses because the media often targets the minds of college students. Cohen said, "This [the touring] is a great experience because we can represent Israel in a different face." Cohen also said that concern exists for other members of the community in Israel, but not nearly as much here in America. "I feel in this place [America] they are individuals and they don't have the common experience [of serving in the army]," she said. The army service experience is what "bring[s] us closer together as a community," Cohen added as she smiled for a group photo with representatives of Israel at Heart present at the event. The team showed just how tight-knit the group is: with their arms wrapped around one another, they smiled one big smile.

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Singing for Survival: Argentines Bring Vibrant Worship to Reform Biennial

By Janet Silver Ghent
Friday March 4, 2005

Singing *Hinei Ma Tov* a cappella in the corner of a meeting room, Argentine Cantor Sheila Nesis closes her eyes while fellow Argentine Cantors Silvina Chemen and Diego Rubinsztein fill out the chord, blending melodically. Their music, the three insist, is not a performance. It's a prayer for peace, for the people Israel and for those in Argentina who have been traumatized by the events of the past 13 years and need healing. All three prefer to call themselves sh'lichei tzibur (prayer leaders) rather than chazzanim. Chazzanim perform, said Nesis. Sh'lichei tzibur are not more than the other people. We get people to a higher level of spirit. We don't face the people. We face the aron, the ark.

The Argentineans were at the Union of Reform Judaism regional biennial at the Santa Clara Marriott last weekend to share their music and tell their stories. They were accompanied by Rabbi David Gelfand of the Jewish Center of the Hamptons on Long Island, who has been instrumental in bringing their music and plight to the attention of the U.S. Jewish community. The cantors are part of a network called Fundación Judaica, headed by Rabbi Sergio Bergman and dedicated to revitalizing Jewish life in Argentina after the terrorist attacks of the early '90s followed by the economic crash of 2001. "The crisis has shown us naked ~ not prepared, Chemen said. But by forming a network and coming together, she added, the Jewish community has grown stronger and emigration has slowed. Chemen, 42, who is a Jewish educator finishing studies to become a rabbi, sees her mission as not simply one of worship.

"My Jewish identity comes not just from synagogue, but from helping my brothers and sisters," those who lost everything found a new dimension to being a Jew in Argentina, said Chemen. Chemen emphasizes that the cantors visits to America are not just to seek assistance for Jewish organizations in Argentina, but to reciprocate by sharing their music and strategies for community survival. "We understand the fact that our people need help, but we also have things that people in America don't have." Among them is a vibrant style of Jewish worship that has inspired such American congregations as New York's B'nai Jeshurun, where services are transfused with heartfelt singing.

In addition, through weathering devastation in their own country for more than a decade, the three have learned something about the power of music and worship as forces of healing. Indeed, the Jewish community in Argentina has been pummeled by repeated

disasters: the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy, which killed 29 people; the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center, which killed 86; the economic collapse of 2001; and political turmoil. "It was a chain that got worse and worse," said Chemen, adding that evidence linking suspects to the bombings was destroyed, hidden or purposefully lost. Then came the crash. The community's Jewish population, which was about 325,000 a couple of decades ago, is now about 200,000. Most have left for Israel.

Catastrophe has transformed the role of the synagogue in Argentina, and the role of the cantor, the three point out. "Before the crisis, people came to synagogue to pray, to relax," said Nesis, 21, who is studying philosophy at university. After people didn't need to relax. They were depressed. They needed to get energy. Instead of quiet melodies, said Rubinsztein, we returned to Chassidic music utilizing some of the melodies of the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach as well as more spirited medleys. Pieces are arranged by Rubinsztein, 29, who is a concert performer, playing keyboards and piano.

Rubinsztein, who has been working as a youth leader in the Jewish community since 1993, distinguishes between his work in the concert hall and in the recording studio with his service in the synagogue. "In the temple, I pray with the music. I pray with my fingers. I pray with my voice. It's not a show. I have my performance in the concert hall. In the synagogue, I help people to pray."

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Troubadour of a Lost Sound: Professor Brings her Sephardic Expertise to Music Fest

By Dan Pine

**J. the Jewish News Weekly of Northern California
Thursday March 17, 2005**

Judith Cohen admits it. She's bi. Bi-musical, that is. That's the official term to describe musicologists who actually perform the music they study. Certainly that applies to Cohen, an expert on the Jewish music of Spain and Portugal. She routinely takes the concert stage, *vielle* in hand (that's an ancient string instrument), singing the lilting melodies of the Sephardim. That's not all she does. The Canadian-born professor is also the Indiana Jones of Sephardic music, traveling the world in search of a faded Jewish culture. She's found it everywhere from Turkey to Morocco to the villages of rural Spain. Cohen will share both her knowledge and tunes when she performs Monday, March 28, at the Jewish Music Festival.

The concert is presented as the Sills Memorial Lecture. It is co-sponsored by the Judah L. Magnes Museum and the Maurice Amado Foundation. Accompanying Cohen will be her daughter Tamar, who sings and plays percussion. The two have been performing together since Tamar was 8 (she's in college now). For the upcoming appearance, Cohen plans to educate her audience as well entertain them. "You obviously want to teach the history of the music you perform," she says. She will talk about the culture of the *Conversos*, the hidden Jews of Iberia, who, out of fear of persecution, professed to be Christians following the Inquisition. Is there a singular Sephardic musical style? Other than being sung in Ladino, a dialect comprised of Spanish and Hebrew, there is none, says Cohen. "Because it's spread over a range of continents and centuries, there's a lot of borrowing. What we're good at over the last 1,000 years is borrowing and adapting from wherever we're living."

Fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, Cohen still loves fieldwork, which often takes her to Spain. The region, she says, is experiencing a renaissance in Sephardic music, which appeals to Jews and non-Jews alike. But that doesn't mean Spain is over its anti-Semitism. Though Spaniards embrace Ladino culture as their own, many of the old canards still crop up from time to time. "You get this contradiction," says Cohen, "where every folk group wants to learn Sephardic songs. But Jews in Spain are invisible."

As an English-speaking Ashkenazi girl from Montreal, Cohen may not at first seem a likely champion of Sephardic music. She played clarinet in high school, though early on she developed a love of medieval music. After graduation, wanderlust took her all over the world. Eventually she blended her love of travel with academia. She earned a doctorate in music and has long juggled performing with field study and teaching. She serves as general editor for the Spain series of Alan Lomax Recordings, a compilation of original and previously unpublished folk music from the last century, with new and extended liner notes.

She is also a founding member of Gerineldo, a Moroccan Judeo-Spanish ensemble that has played the Jewish Music Festival. Cohen is on the faculty at York University in Toronto, where she has taught Jewish and medieval music. Few are better able to comment on the state of Sephardic music than Cohen. The Sephardic revival, though maybe less widespread than the klezmer renaissance, brings out equal passion, she says. Still, she does see some room for improvement.

"In the beginning, a lot of people studied klezmer recordings. Many grew up in Ashkenazi households and learned the culture. But the majority of those who perform Ladino songs are not from the culture. Most try to perform Sephardic music as if it's medieval. It doesn't bother me as an ethnomusicologist. But as a private person it bothers me." That may be one reason why she enjoys playing music in as authentic a manner as possible. And it doesn't hurt that she's a bit of a ham. "It's fun," says Cohen of performing. "I love it. I get the audience involved. I see them all as potential friends."

Judith Cohen will perform 7:30 p.m. Monday, March 28, at the Berkeley Richmond Jewish Community Center, 1414 Walnut St.,

Berkeley. Tickets: \$13-\$18. Information: (415) 276-1511 or www.brjcc.org.

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China Liberalizes — and in Comes Isaac Bashevis Singer

By Bryan Schwartzman (Philadelphia Jewish exponent)

JTA email Edition

Thursday March 10, 2005

When Xu Xin graduated from high school, he did the same thing millions of teens across the People's Republic of China did: He joined the Red Guard. Xu, now 56, joined the paramilitary group and headed to the countryside to stir up fervor for the aging Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. "Everybody had to go with the flow," Xu said of the days when Mao used bands of students to try to re-establish his fading authority over the country. "An individual can't change the course." During this period when so many suffered under a closed and insular system, Xu had no way of knowing that he would one day play a part in opening China to the outside world and, at the same time, bring a little Yiddishkeit to the Far East.

Xu spent several days recently as the scholar-in-residence at the Philip and Muriel Berman Center for Judaic Studies at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, discussing how he arrived at his field of study. His journey toward an understanding of Judaism started in typical communist fashion. When Xu graduated from Nanjing University in 1977, he was told that he would teach literature there. "At that time, a job was assigned to you, like it or not," he said. Mao had died the year before, and Chinese society slowly began to reassess itself. It suddenly was permissible to criticize parts of Mao's legacy. "We started to believe something was wrong with society, and started to look to other cultures as inspiration," he explained.

He believes that by understanding Jewish ideas, Chinese society can come to value the individual, as well as the community. "In Judaism, individual life is important, not like Chinese culture. We emphasize the collective. You're never supposed to say 'me'; you're only supposed to say, 'I'm for other people.'" As intellectual freedom began to expand ever so slightly, Xu was offered the opportunity to choose any area of American literature he liked. And just as China's relationship to the outside world was thawing, American Jewish authors were receiving international accolades. Saul Bellow had won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1976, and Isaac Bashevis Singer took home the prize two years later. "Bellow, [Bernard] Malamud, Singer — they create a world in their stories that is so alien to the Chinese," said Xu. "We don't have any of the cultural or religious background to understand it."

So he boned up on Jewish life in 20th-century America and 19th-century Poland, and soon began to delve into Jewish religious texts to better understand Singer's references. His involvement in Jewish culture deepened even further when he spent 1986 as a visiting professor at Chicago State University. During that time, he lived with a Jewish family and often attended weekly services. But his first visit to Israel in 1988 — four years before China established diplomatic relations with the Jewish state — cemented his fascination. "[That visit] was a total surprise. Whatever knowledge we have about Israel was either negative or superficial," he recalled. "I saw the society; I talked directly with both Jews and Arabs. I heard their thoughts over the conflict, and started to have some concrete understanding of the country." When Xu returned to China in 1989, he decided to dedicate himself to teaching Jewish religion, history and culture to the country's students.

At that time, there were no full-time professors of Jewish studies. Today, there are 20 who are part of the China Judaic Studies Association, which Xu heads. The director of a Jewish studies master's and doctoral program at Nanjing University, he is currently visiting a series of American universities to raise funds and collect books for his department. (He also hopes to hire a full-time Hebrew instructor.) While at Lehigh, he delivered a lecture to a packed room about the subject that has now become his specialty — the Chinese Jewish community of Kaifeng, which dates back to the 11th century. He told the audience that Jews may have lived in China as early as the talmudic period, adding that, though many Jewish communities have existed in China, the Kaifeng community is studied the most because of the large historical record that was left, including documents written in Judeo-Persian. Kaifeng Jewry more or less ceased to exist as a cohesive community around the turn of the 20th century. Assimilation and intermarriage, he said, finally proved the communities' undoing. "They established a meaningful Jewish life," said the professor. "If they hadn't followed their traditions [for so long], we wouldn't know anything about them."

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Israeli Doctor Declares War on AIDS in Africa

By Allison Kaplan Sommer

Israel 21c: A Focus Beyond the Conflict

February 27, 2005
www.israel21c.org

When Dr. Michael Alkan received the invitation to join the front lines of the war on AIDS in Africa by setting up clinics in a remote village nestled in the desert plains of Botswana, the response of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev professor was immediate. "When does the next plane leave?" he asked. The professor at the university's Faculty of Center for Health Sciences and Soroka University Medical Center and a world-renowned expert on AIDS doesn't let long stretches of time pass without boarding an airplane. In the past, the 64-year-old Israeli has helped set up a medical school in rural Kenya, and worked under the most difficult conditions in Ecuador, Nepal, and Papua, New Guinea, Thailand and Cambodia. Most recently he was on the ground in Southeast Asia providing relief to the tsunami victims.

"I guess you could say my 'hobby' is providing health care to the Third World," he told ISRAEL21c, adding his favorite joke: "They say that the best doctors go to hell." Despite his lighthearted tone, there is nothing frivolous about what Alkan does. And of all the projects he's undertaken over the years, he regards his recent mission in Botswana to set up AIDS clinics as the most important medical work of his career, potentially affecting the lives of millions. Alkan, incumbent of the BGU Werner J. and Charlotte A. Gunzburger Chair for the Study of Infectious Diseases and founder of the infectious diseases unit at Soroka, was handpicked by the Israeli branch of the Merck, Sharpe and Dohme pharmaceutical giant, to join an international team that is working to save Botswana, and create a model of treatment that can be replicated across Africa, a continent that is literally dying every moment.

The numbers are almost too staggering to believe. AIDS has the potential to utterly destroy Africa. 40,000 Africans per week are dying each week: that means 8000 per day - 333 per hour, or five Africans a minute. The disease, that has become treatable, if not curable in the West, could kill 10 million people on the continent of Africa by the end of the decade if it is not unchecked. A number of reasons have made Botswana ground zero for the world battle against AIDS. First, in Botswana is one of the most stricken countries. More than a third of the 1,600,000 citizens have the HIV virus - the highest prevalence in the world, due to a tradition of promiscuity that has made attempts at AIDS education almost futile. Just as importantly, Botswana is rich - perhaps the richest nation in Africa on a per capita basis. "This is a wealthy country, their money comes from diamond trade, raising cattle and tourism," explains Alkan. "It is a very special African country because people can become wealthy through work. And it is a democracy with zero tolerance for corruption, whose government has been brave enough to step out of denial, declare AIDS a crisis, and commit budget and resources to fighting it."

All of these factors together have made a myriad of international bodies interested in saving this nation. The most significant contribution came from Merck and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, each of whom gave \$50 million to treat health care personnel in Botswana to treat HIV AIDS using the latest drug cocktail. That treatment has turned the disease in the West from one that promised short-term death to a chronic illness that can be controlled by drugs long-term. Botswana is the first African country that is providing AIDS treatment free of charge to its citizens - a revolutionary move. But merely providing pharmaceuticals - even free of charge - is not enough. The drugs themselves can't do any good if clinics aren't set up to make sure they are administered properly. In a country that doesn't even have a medical school, this was a challenge. Which is why Merck located between 20-30 doctors from around the world - including Alkan - who would be willing to go into the remote parts of Botswana in order to set up clinics, and teach locals - both medical professionals and untrained - how to treat AIDS.

Alkan was born in Jerusalem in 1941 and studied at Hebrew University, which, at the time, was the only medical school in Israel. He came to Beersheva and BGU in 1974 where he founded Soroka University Medical Center's infectious diseases unit. "I went into infectious diseases because people get well, and then along came AIDS, and suddenly I was faced with more dying patients than the oncologists." Thankfully, in recent years, the cocktail of drugs has allowed AIDS patients to survive and lead productive lives in western countries, including Israel. The project in Botswana is trying to make this happen in Africa as well. Alkan joined his counterparts and for an orientation process, and was then sent to the town of Ranzi in the middle of the Kalahari Desert for two months to set up a clinic and train its staff. His work was so successful, he returned later for another month to the town of Gamara, which is even more remote. "The desert there isn't the desert as we know it in the Negev," he said. "It's really a prairie, covered with abundant trees and lots of wildlife. You have to be careful when you drive, because an elephant, giraffe, or a lion can just show up and cross the road."

That wasn't the only challenge. Alkan also faced fighting the deadly disease with the severe limitations on medical supplies, equipment and drugs. Test results that would take hours to receive if done in Israel sometimes took weeks. "It can be very frustrating," he admits. "My mantra is always that I haven't come to change the standard of care, I look and see what is the best way to give care within the limitations of that place. In Israel, we have 25 antibiotics to work with and in Botswana they have five. So when I give a lecture, I'm going to talk about what it is possible to accomplish with those five antibiotics, and not mention the ones they don't have."

Alkan's mission was not only to teach the local staff the technicalities of AIDS treatment, but to inspire them to convince their countrymen to be tested and to fight the disease, and not surrender to it fatalistically. In a country where AIDS education for prevention has been a devastating failure, half of all adults between 25-29 have the virus, including more than half of the pregnant women. The life expectancy is age 40, and soon it will reach the point where half of the children of the country will be orphans raised by their other family members, until they too die. "The main problem is young girls aged 15-25 who are experimenting with sex and are acculturated not to say no to men who want it. They bear children out of wedlock that are raised by their mothers and sisters, then when they eventually get married they have more children - and then eventually that husband goes out and tracks down more young

girls. Preaching against this doesn't work and education to use condoms doesn't work. I tried to convince one man to use condoms and he said, 'I don't eat bananas unless I peel them,'" says Alkan.

But despite those obstacles, Alkan has seen progress in the clinics he created. In Gamara, by the time he was finished with his stint, there were 300 patients coming regularly to the new clinic and sticking faithfully to the regimen that was keeping them alive. Two years ago, only 3500 Botswans who were being treated with the AIDS cocktail, now 19 clinics are up and running and treating 33,000 patients. The most important patients are pregnant women, who by getting treatment, can avoid passing the virus to their unborn children. The numbers may be small - a drop in the bucket compared to the numbers that are dying - but the survival of the patients being treated at the clinics sends an important message to their community: it is possible to live with AIDS. This, according to Alkan, motivates others to be tested and seek treatment instead of fearing the stigma more the disease. Alkan says that he and the other participants will only truly consider this program a success if it is taken and replicated in other African countries. And he's ready to hop on any plane that will make that happen.

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Jewish Groups Find Going Tough as they Work to Pressure Sudan

By Matthew E. Berger
JTA Email Edition
March 6, 2005

The Jewish community is facing resistance as it attempts to intensify pressure on the Sudanese government to ease the violence that has killed tens of thousands. Several Jewish community activists said they were not finding much interest in the issue when they tried to partner with African-American or church groups.

Instead, U.S. Jewish groups have turned to international organizations such as the United Nations, European Union and African Union to halt the killings and help those who have fled the fighting in the African nation and flocked to refugee camps. Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, said he led a coalition that met with ambassadors of African Union countries, asking them to increase the number of troops in Sudan and to protect innocents as well as humanitarian workers. Saperstein said some progress has been made in expanding the African Union's mission to include protecting innocents.

John Prendergast, special adviser to the president of the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit agency, said there has not been one U. N. or other international punitive measure levied against Sudan in 23 months. "The message is as clear as it can come," he told JCPA and Hillel delegates Feb. 27. "You can kill as many people as you want. There will be no repercussions." The government has exploited ethnic tensions, sponsoring Arab militias that have killed tens of thousands of Africans in Sudan. Experts estimate that more than 1 million people have fled the violence and most are now in refugee camps in neighboring Chad.

But Saperstein told JTA it has become more difficult to press for sanctions for Sudan, because of concerns that this might disrupt a separate shaky peace deal that has emerged in and ended violence between Muslims in the north and Christians and animists in the south. "How do you balance compromises made to end the war without tying your hands to difficulties in other parts of the country?" he asked.

The issue played a large role in the Jewish Council for Public Affairs' plenum last week in Washington, capturing the support of Jewish community relations councils. It was also discussed by students who were attending the Charlotte B. and Jack J. Spitzer B'nai B'rith Hillel Forum on Public Policy at the same time. "This is genocide," said Martin Raffel, JCPA associate executive director for international concerns. "If there's a genocide happening, how can this not be at the top of our agenda?" JCPA passed a resolution denouncing the genocide, and questioned Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) on the issue.

It also pressed the United Nations to condemn the genocide. "I wouldn't yet give up on the United Nations," Clinton said March 1. "I would like to argue and shame them into taking action in Darfur." Scores of convention-goers sported green bracelets to acknowledge the genocide. One was even presented to McConnell. Felice Gaer, director of the American Jewish Committee's Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, said the Jewish community has a unique role to play in advocating for more action. "There is a certain moral force the Jewish community has addressing issues of genocide," she said. "It shouldn't be allowed not to speak from the heart just because this has become an issue for the European Union or African Union."

The JCPA's resolution calls for targeted sanctions to be imposed on the Sudanese government and its business interests as a means of pressuring the government to end the genocide. Raffel joined a delegation who met with John Underriner, project management coordinator in the Sudan Programs Project at the State Department, and gave him a petition signed by nearly 1,000 JCPA and Hillel conference participants. Raffel said Underriner suggested the Bush administration has seen a rise in public concern about the crisis there, and said it is of great importance to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

The JCPA also passed several other resolutions on foreign policy issues. Language that backed \$350 million in U.S. aid to the

Palestinians was added to a bill expressing support for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The measure was approved unanimously. The plenum also approved a resolution expressing concern over Iranian efforts to obtain nuclear weapons and urged the United States and international community to use "appropriate means" to combat the threat. Original language that suggested military intervention as an option was deleted. The Reform movement is expected to broach the topic on March 13, when it opens its biannual Consultation on Conscience.

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Africans Say their Story, too, Excluded from Middle East Studies

By Rachel Pomerance
JTA email Edition
March 8, 2005

Daoud Salih, a Sudanese refugee, does not seem a likely advocate for revamping the Middle East studies department at Columbia University. But Salih says he shares the concerns of many Jewish students at the New York City school. His story, and the story of other Africans expelled from or enslaved in Arab countries, is a narrative largely excluded from a college education in Middle Eastern studies, the African representative said. In making their case at a daylong conference sponsored by pro-Israel groups and benefactors at Columbia University on Sunday, their views became a new dimension to an ongoing controversy engulfing the university's Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures Department.

Ever since the public screening last fall of "Columbia Unbecoming," a film that documented the concerns of pro-Israel students who feel intimidated by faculty with anti-Israel views, the issue has embroiled the university and captured national headlines. Charles Jacobs, president of the David Project, which produced "Columbia Unbecoming," introduced the African speakers as an example of alternative viewpoints that could be integrated into the Middle Eastern studies department — and at the same time increase the numbers who support change in the university's Middle East department. The strident focus on the Palestinian cause — what he calls "Palestinianism" — to the detriment of other issues, Jacobs said, is a "highly cultivated weapon of mass distraction."

The conference, which drew more than 300 people, came shortly after the Columbia committee investigating student charges of intimidation was expected to have handed down a report on the matter. But in a Feb. 28 letter to university President Lee Bollinger, the committee said it required more time to finish its report to the vice president for Arts and Sciences and a public summary of its findings by March 25. The program was not timed to coincide with the report, however, said Edward Beck, president of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, a group of 600 professors that fights anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism on campus, and a sponsor of the conference. The plenum, he said, was a "call for academic integrity" to "raise the level of scholarship when it comes to Middle Eastern studies." However, the pro-Israel side appeared to be the only one in attendance.

Beck said the group invited members of the MEALAC department and university officials to the conference, but neither responded to the invitation. But according to Susan Brown, a university spokeswoman who attended the event, the invitation came in the form of a mass e-mail, not a direct invitation. Brown also said that the university is "continually engaging in efforts to expand and diversify its regional studies programs." She noted, for example, the new Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi chair in Israel and Jewish studies, with a focus on modern Israel. Part of the money raised for the chair, named after a longtime Jewish studies professor at Columbia, will go toward bringing visiting professors from all disciplines at Hebrew University to teach at Columbia for a year. Whether that chair will be part of the Middle East studies department is still unclear.

Other speakers at the conference included Israel's minister for Diaspora affairs, Natan Sharansky, and Martin Kramer, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at Tel Aviv University, who addressed the group by video. Sharansky said that when the Zionist narrative is lost from Middle Eastern studies, it is "not academic studies, it's propaganda." He was drawing on his familiarity with propaganda from life in the former Soviet Union. He noted some irony in the fact that such a situation could arise at a university where the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry was launched in the 1960s.

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Book Review: *Let's Talk about Race* By Julius Lester **Facing race with kids**

Reviewed by Susan Faust
San Francisco Chronicle
Sunday, February 27, 2005

HARPERCOLLINS/AMISTAD; \$15.99; 32 PAGES; AGES 6-10

In our talk-television culture, few subjects are taboo. But one that still makes people squirm is race. Are we the same or different? Do we see differences as a positive or a negative? Are we really one thing or another? Julius Lester takes up these questions in "Let's Talk About Race." Sounds risky, like taking a long walk on a short pier, only here it's telling a long story in a short picture book. And it works surprisingly well. Lester begins with an idea: "I am a story." He declares his favorite food (fish), hobbies (photography and crossword puzzles), religion (Jewish), nationality (from the United States) and finally race (black). Then he asks, "How does your story begin?"

By providing a gracious model, he immediately draws the reader in. It's all about dialogue. Then he quickly moves from personal to racial identity. Races, he explains, tell stories about themselves too, often revolving around the refrain, "MY RACE IS BETTER THAN YOUR RACE." Lester labels such a put-down for what it is -- an expression of self-doubt and fear. Then he connects the dots: Race, gender, religion and socio-economic status can confer privilege or elicit prejudice. Lester cleverly demonstrates the folly of race as a divider. He invites us to slip out of our skins and get down to our skeletons. "Then everything would be normal except we would look at each other and couldn't tell who was a man, who was a woman, who was white, black, Hispanic or Asian."

Good point. So, he asks, which story to believe -- the one about how "my race is better than yours" or the one about how underneath, "I look like you and you look like me?" The right answer is a no-brainer. Point Reyes illustrator Karen Barbour fills the pages with vibrant abstract paintings that are playful and poignant. There are few entry-level books about race, and certainly none as attractive as this one. Together Lester and Barbour create an easy catalyst for conversations (many conversations!) that is candid yet casual, provocative yet affirming, assured but never preachy.

"Let's Talk About Race" is just a beginning. There is much left to talk about and many unanswered questions. What is race, anyway? Just a gene pool or something more? Historical experience, cultural affinity, something to do with power, or nothing more than perception? Then there is the question about how race shapes not only identity but also destiny, and so often adversely. There is, sadly, a need for a companion volume, perhaps titled "Let's Talk About Racism."

Susan Faust is a librarian at San Francisco's Katherine Delmar Burke School.

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