

Be'chol Lashon Update August 2006

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BE'CHOL LASHON UPDATES



Be'chol Lashon congratulates Rabbi Sholomo and Rabbinit Rayah Levy on the birth of their son Levi Yosef.

Funny, you don't look Jewish!

Davi Cheng, May 29, 2006

Former President, Beth Chayim Chadashim



At the end of the Beth Chayim Chadashim Humanitarian Award Brunch, I walked over to meet our guest, Bruce Vilanch. Before I even had a chance to open my mouth to introduce myself, Bruce reached over with his gigantic hand, and sporting a huge smile on his face he took my hand firmly in his and shook it warmly. "Funny, you don't look Jewish!" he said. I chuckled at his comment at the time. It seemed like an appropriate statement coming from a comedian, but later that evening I began to doubt. Was he actually joking? Or was he just expressing what was in his mind?

Similarly a few years back, when I informed one of my co-workers that I would be taking High Holy Days off from work, I was met with a burst of laughter. My so very progressive friend thought that I was so desperate for time off from work that I would go to the extreme in trying to pass as a Jew. His reaction was partly because he thought that I was joking around with him, which I did do a lot, but the main reason he was laughing so hard was because in his mind, I don't look anything like a Jew at all; and to think that I could get away taking time off for a Jewish Holiday tickled his funny bone. After he calmed down and realized that I wasn't joking, he said, "Oh sorry, I thought that you may be a Buddhist or Christian, but Jewish?"

So what does a Jew look like?

Have you noticed that in the Torah, there is not one single description of what our Jewish ancestors looked like? You can look it up. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Rachel, Leah, Rebecca, Aaron and Miriam, Moses, Nadav and Avihu, King Solomon, David and Jonathan, Naomi and Ruth...etc. you will not find one description. Well, ok, we know that Sarah was beautiful, her beauty had helped her gain wealth and benefited Abraham, and that maybe Joseph was a handsome man. We also learned that Moses's face glowed a radiant light after talking to God. But do we know what color hair they had? What facial features? What eye colors, skin colors? Were they tall? Or short? Who knows? No one really knows what anyone in the Torah looked like, and there are no descriptions anywhere to be found.

There are, however, in the Torah descriptions of the characteristics and behaviors of the Jews—what they did and didn't do; how they behaved and what they said and how they said it. We learned that Abraham left his homeland as instructed by God, and that he circumcised himself at a ripe old age; we also knew that Sarah laughed, Rebecca drew water from the well for the camels; and that Isaac loved Rebecca, Jacob wrestled with God and he wept on his brother Esau's neck; Joseph became Pharaoh's right hand man and forgave his eleven brothers. We learned about the actions of the Israelites and the consequences of their actions. We also learned about how one should treat strangers and sojourners, to take care of the poor and the less fortunate, and how we should love our neighbors as ourselves. We learned about the Israelites' relationships with one another and with God.

I believe that the Torah left the description of people's looks out on purpose, so that it is clear to us that being a Jew is not defined by what we looked like or that we have to look a particular way. Our looks aren't as important as what we do or say, how we treat one another, and how we treat others not like us. It is our actions, how we live our lives—what we do, and what we say, how we do it and say it that defines us as Jews.

So, what does a Jew look like? We are a people of all looks: the world.

Congratulations to Michelle Stein-Evers Frankl!



Be'chol Lashon would like to congratulate Michelle Stein-Evers Frankl on her recent appointment as the Restitution Officer for JewishCare, the local Jewish social services agency in Sydney, Australia.

Michelle is currently working with the Hungarian Jewish population in Sydney, which is one of the largest Hungarian populations in the Diaspora. The claims conference in New York recently sent notices that the Hungarian government has reopened their reparations program. Michelle is working tirelessly, helping community members with their applications.

CURRENT NEWS

First Ethiopian Executive Slated for Confirmation

By Daphna Berman, June 22 2006, Haaretz.com



The first Ethiopian member of World Zionist Organization executive is slated to be confirmed tomorrow, the closing day of the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem. Shlomo Mola, who now serves as the Jewish Agency's senior consultant for Ethiopian immigrants, will head the department for Zionist institutions. A representative of Kadima, Mola was number 33 on the party's list and missed the Knesset cutoff. Now he is being tapped to become the first Ethiopian executive in an Israeli national institution.

The nomination is especially significant, since his confirmation would mark the first time an Ethiopian immigrant has been elected to a key leadership position within the Zionist establishment that does not deal specifically with the Ethiopian sector. "It was Olmert's idea to have an Ethiopian deal with non-Ethiopian issues," said one WZO insider. "It was a way of showing that after 20 years in Israel, Ethiopians can be the boss of run-of-the-mill Israeli bureaucrats. The idea is that it shouldn't be looked at as strange, that Ethiopians have already become mainstream Israelis."

Mola, who met with Haaretz yesterday, said that nominations like his are critical to the success of the Ethiopian sector in Israel. "If we want to absorb Ethiopians properly, you can't allow them to work only with Ethiopian issues. You need also to give them responsibility for other issues in the Jewish world so that an Ethiopian ghetto is not created." His nomination for the WZO executive, Mola added, is Prime Minister Olmert's way of "sending a message to all of Israel that I am capable and that Ethiopians can handle a leading position."

Mola, 39, is a self-made man in every respect and is not - in his own words - a member of the privileged classes from Tel Aviv or the upscale Jerusalem neighborhood of Rehavia. In many ways, Mola is also something of a walking poster boy for the Zionist dream. Born in a small farming village in the Gondar region of Ethiopia, he is the sixth of 11 children. "I was raised loving Zion, Jerusalem and Israel. I knew that there was a Promised Land and that we were only in Ethiopia temporarily - even if temporarily was 2,500 years."

As a teenager in 1983, Mola left his village with a group of Jewish friends and began walking toward Sudan barefoot, hoping to cross through Egypt and eventually reach Israel. They walked day and night through deserts until they reached the Sudanese border, after which they were arrested and detained for three months. They were released, placed in a refugee camp and later airlifted to Israel via Operation Moses. His parents and siblings were left behind in Ethiopia and at age 17, he was alone in a new country.

"I lived here alone, without parents, without family. I didn't know where I was and it was hard for me. Very hard. I came with a

sense of euphoria and a dream, but all of a sudden, I realized that Jerusalem was not covered with gold and that not everyone here was righteous. I was a Zionist with my feet and I walked through the desert to live and breathe Zionism. But I paid a price for my Zionism."

As a new immigrant, he enrolled in an ulpan, matriculated, studied social work at Bar-Ilan University and then enrolled in the army. He became the manager of an absorption center for the Jewish Agency, moved up within the organization's ranks and also earned a law degree in the process. He was the Jewish Agency's senior consultant for Ethiopian immigrants when former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon asked him to join Kadima. "I told him that when the Prime Minister asks, I can't refuse," Mola recalled with a smile.

In his new position, Mola is responsible for the committee to fight anti-Semitism, the Israel Zionist Council and the Zionist archives, among others issues. But he says that the appointment means more than just prestige. "Until 1973, Israel didn't recognize Ethiopian Jews as Jews. They said that there was no such thing as a black Jew. Now, a black Jew is a member of the WZO executive. It is the realization of a dream. It's taken more than 100 years [since the start of the World Zionist Congress] but I was now given this role and it symbolizes something very special."

"The path that I have begun will hopefully allow other Ethiopian youth to be motivated, to realize that they are also capable," he added. "I hope that it is just a start and that it will continue to open more doors."

Owens Goes to Bat for Russian Jews

By Walter Ruby, June 30 2006, The Jewish Week



In a gesture that has won praise from leaders of the Russian Jewish community here, Rep. Major Owens, an African-American congressman from a Brooklyn district with few Russian speakers, has sent a letter to the Russian president urging Russia to pay pensions to elderly Russian Jewish refugees in the U.S. Stating in his letter to Vladimir Putin, which he sent in late April, that refugees who left Russia during the Soviet era "have a clear and undeniable right to the money they have earned throughout their careers." _He also pointed out that in the late 1990s, Russia paid off a \$400 million debt incurred by the former Czarist regime a century ago to French and English nationals. "Even though Russia's debt to its pensioners is not nearly as large ... the resolution to their problem is nowhere in sight," Owens wrote._

Owens has not yet received a reply from Putin.

In addition to Putin, Owens sent letters to the leaders of all other former Soviet republics urging them to pay pensions to refugees who left their countries for the U.S. either before or after the breakup of the Soviet Union. He has also contacted many of his congressional colleagues urging them to take up the pension issue with Russia and the other former Soviet republics.

Owens decided to write to Putin in April after meeting with members of the Association of New Immigrants for the State of Israel and Social Justice (ANISISJ), a group that has pressed the pension issue. According to Owens, "I decided the least I could do was to contact Putin and the other [post-Soviet] leaders and express my concern." "I see this as a moral issue," he continued. "These people worked their entire lives in the Soviet Union. Just because they left the country doesn't change that and doesn't remove the obligation of the country to give them some support in their old age."

Owens, who will retire later this year after 24 years as the representative of New York's 11th Congressional District in north and central Brooklyn, said that his advocacy on behalf of Russian Jewish pensioners is indicative "of the warm relationship I have always enjoyed with the Jewish community. I have worked together with like-minded Jews on many issues, since the days back in the 1980s when I angered a lot of people in my own community by condemning Louis Farrakhan for anti-Semitism."

Owens, whose seat is now being contested by three African-Americans, including his own son Chris, and Jewish City Councilman David Yassky, acknowledged that he may have contributed to heightening black-Jewish tensions in recent months by calling Yassky a "colonizer" for trying to capture a seat that has been held by African-Americans since the 1960s. But he insisted that his objection to Yassky has "nothing to do with his being white or Jewish, but rather because he comes in here with a million dollars and a big donor base and is trying to take over." _

ANISISJ President Yakov Goodman expressed his gratitude for Owens' effort. "We are very grateful to Congressman Owens for pressing Putin and the other ex-Soviet leaders to pay pensions to ex-Soviet refugees that they are entitled to as a basic human right," Goodman said. Noting that Russia is already paying pensions to people who left the country after the fall of the Soviet Union

and were already pensioners at the time, "It is totally unfair to pay pensions to those people but not to those who left earlier. Those people spent their entire working lives toiling on behalf of the Soviet Union." _

Goodman said that over the past few months he has held two meetings with Russian Consul General in New York Sergei Garmonin on the pension issue. Garmonin is presently in Moscow for consultations and his office did not return queries about the matter from The Jewish Week.

Goodman, who has also been in touch with Ukrainian officials on the issue, recently received a letter from Ukrainian Consul-General M. Kirichenko stipulating that Ukraine is in the process of revamping its laws regarding payments of pensions to former Ukrainian citizens living abroad. Noting that Russia and Ukraine presently pay their pensioners \$80-\$100 a month, Goodman remarked, "That may seem like a very small amount, but receiving such payments would make a big difference in the quality of life of elderly Russians in Brooklyn, most of whom get by on modest monthly SSI payments (of just over \$600 a month for individuals and \$900 for married couples) and have to pay rents every month that equal or exceed what they get from SSI."

Children Adopted from China to Visit as Government Guests

By Janine DeFao, July 23 2006, SFGate.com



When Hannah Pendleton returns to China this week, it will be like seeing her native country for the first time. While Hannah was 10 when she was adopted from China by an American family, she saw nothing in her first decade beyond the walls of an orphanage. Now, Hannah and her two adopted sisters will be among 42 Bay Area children invited by the Chinese government to see the famed sites and wonders of their birthplace, from the Great Wall to Tiananmen Square to iconic pandas -- things Hannah knows only from pictures. "I think it will be much better to see it up close and real," said Hannah, 17, of Castro Valley.

Hannah is among more than 50,000 children, the vast majority of them girls, adopted in the United States from China since the country opened its doors to international adoption in the early 1990s. More children are adopted in the United States from China than from any other foreign country, and the number continues to grow, with nearly 8,000 last year. Many adoptive parents are working to ensure their children grow up with a connection to their heritage. They arrange toddler play dates with other children born in China. They enroll them in language classes and cultural camps. They travel to China. And as the first wave of adopted children enters adolescence, China is reaching out to its native daughters. "We really think with their coming they will be able to understand China much more," Li Jian, director of the legislative affairs office of China's Ministry of Civil Affairs, which oversees adoptions, said through an interpreter. "This will only help the relationship between the United States and China."

Organizers believe the trip is the first time the Chinese government will pick up all the expenses, except airfare, for adoptees to return to the country where they were born, although the government in recent years has been partially subsidizing trips for adopted children and often pays for travel for visitors, such as the recent trip by San Francisco school officials interested in expanding Chinese language programs. Families taking the adoption trip are paying the airfare.

The trip came about through the efforts of Bay Area businessman Kenneth Yeung, a native of China who adopted a Chinese child, his daughter Melissa, who is now 13. In 2003, a foundation headed by Yeung became the first overseas organization to open an orphanage in China. It serves disabled children. Yeung, who owns Prince of Peace Enterprises Inc., in Hayward, which manufactures and imports products including the analgesic Tiger Balm, said he talked to Chinese adoption officials he knows about sponsoring the trip. "If these kids know the Chinese government is interested in them and supports them, it will make a big difference. Otherwise, they may have a bitter feeling: 'My own country abandoned me, gave me away,'" said Yeung, who arranged the trip for children adopted through Mountain View's Bay Area Adoption Services, which helped him adopt his daughter. More than 100 local residents will take the two-week trip, which will include official banquets and cultural exchanges with Chinese students.

Napa photographer Norma Quintana, 51, who is in the process of adopting a baby from China, also will be going with the group. Quintana will help the children photograph their trip and hopes to create an exhibition, called "Returning Swallows," of their photography in China and the United States. "Swallows, these beautiful birds, are all over Chinese poetry. They're very fast and tenacious, and they always come back," Quintana said. These children "are going back to their symbolic nest. What I hope for them is a really positive connection and a visual connection to their birthplace."

Of the 42 adoptees ages 8 to 18 making the trip, three are boys. While it is illegal to abandon a child in China, the country's "one-child" policy, introduced to curb population growth, still results in a disproportionate number of abandoned girls. Parents want a male heir to carry on their name and care for them in old age, as is the traditional role of sons in China.

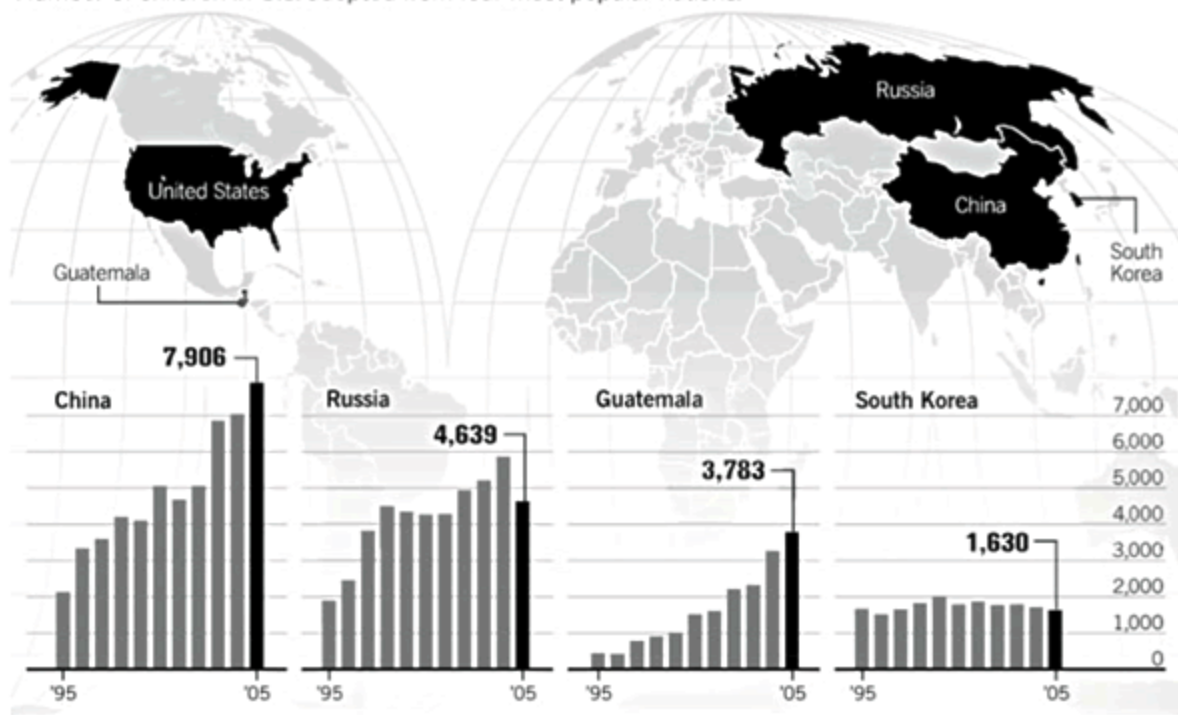
Peggy Scott, president of the Northern California chapter of Families with Children from China, said China trips for returning adoptees are increasingly popular as parents try to help their children maintain their roots. She said parents of adopted Chinese children have tried to learn lessons from the experience of children adopted from Korea in the 1960s and 1970s. "Many of those children, the older ones, did not get exposure to Korean culture. When they got to be teenagers, they were having identity crises," said Scott, of Berkeley. "Now we know better." Scott took her own adopted daughter, 12-year-old Abigail, back to China in April for a trip that included a visit to her orphanage. "She got to fall in love with China," Scott said. "It filled in a lot of blanks for her." It also demystified the orphanage, a place that seemed so scary to Abigail that her mother couldn't even say the word "orphanage" for years.

Following this week's official trip to China, Allison Ng, 13, also will visit the orphanage where she was living when her parents adopted her as a 7-week-old baby. "I want to see all those babies and think back and imagine myself there," said Ng, of San Rafael. She said she expects it will make her happy because "I actually got chosen, but a little sad because the babies there weren't as fortunate." Her father, Allen Ng, who is of Chinese descent but was born in the United States, said he hopes the trip will help Allison get to know herself better. "I want her to get a better sense of who she is and where she came from and maybe help her answer her own questions about herself," he said.

Claire Pendleton has similar hopes for her daughters, Katherine, 18, Hannah, 17 and Erika, 10. Erika was adopted as a baby, but Hannah was 10 and Katherine was 11. "Since I was born there, I have a very strong connection to China. I really miss the culture," said Katherine, who traveled with her family to China in 2000, a year before they adopted Hannah from another American family when her placement didn't work out. Katherine is most looking forward to eating Szechuan hot pot, a spicy soup she said just isn't the same in the United States. "It's really exciting to me that the Chinese government cares enough about their children to bring them back," said Claire Pendleton. "I'd like (my daughters) to take away a renewed pride in the country where they were born and a greater cultural understanding."

Children adopted from foreign countries

Number of children in U.S. adopted from four most popular nations.

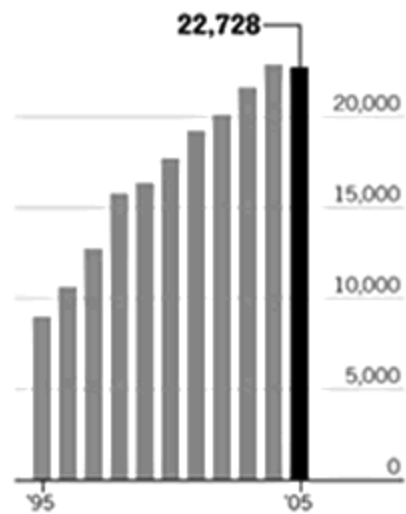


Source: U.S. Department of State

The Chronicle

Overall adoptions

Total number of children in U.S. adopted from other nations:



Source: U.S. Department of State

The Chronicle

IDENTITY

Dual Identity, Double the Questions It's Not Easy Being Jewish and Chinese

By Sarah Price Brown, July 14 2006, The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles



Lily Ling Goldstein examines the Torah portion for her upcoming Bat Mitzvah with her Hebrew tutor, Deborah Kreingel

Chinese villagers found the baby, abandoned by her birth parents, in a basket on a riverbank. "Just like Moses," the child's adoptive mother, Terri Pollock, says. Today, Leah Hua Xia Pollock, 14, lives in Seattle and plays the flute in her temple's klezmer band. Last year, Leah became a bat mitzvah. As she stood on the bimah, looking out at the crowd of white faces before her, "it just dawned on me," she said, "that even if I do look in the mirror and see someone different from the people around me, it doesn't matter, because I'm accepted."

Leah is among the first in a tidal wave of Chinese-born girls who are growing up in Jewish families in the United States. When she was adopted in 1992, she was one of only 206 Chinese children brought to the United States that year. Last year, Americans adopted slightly more than 7,900 children from China, nearly all of them girls.

China only opened its doors in a big way to international adoption in 1991 to help mitigate its problem of abandoned children, brought on by China's one-child policy. That policy, which the government enforces by imposing economic penalties for noncompliance, combined with the traditional culture that sons care for their parents in old age, had resulted in a sea of neglected children, particularly girls. These days, more American families are adopting from China than any other foreign country, and a large number of those families are Jewish. A wave of girls is now coming of age, starting to face challenging issues of identity.

There is the question of what it means to -- look Jewish -- for one -- and the matter of who is a Jew in the eyes of the Jewish community and society at large. But just as important, there is the question of how to incorporate both Chinese culture and

Judaism into these children's lives -- without sacrificing one for the other.

The experiences of Leah and her peers suggest that these cross-cultural clans can function as well as any other sort of family, but inevitably, there are moments of discomfort and confusion. And sooner or later, these children -- like all Jews -- must make their own decisions about identity and faith.

On a recent afternoon at Temple Isaiah, a Reform congregation in West Los Angeles, 13-year-old Lily Ling Goldstein, dressed in jean shorts and flip-flops, practiced her bat mitzvah Torah portion with a tutor. Lily Ling's mother, Martha Goldstein, wiped away a tear as she watched her daughter. "I'm starting to cry, listening to her sing the Hebrew," she said. Lily Ling's portion comes from the first book of the Bible, Genesis, meaning "birth," and this reminds Goldstein of her daughter's "rebirth," of "her coming here and becoming part of the Jewish community." At home, Goldstein has hung three flags over the fireplace in the den, representing the United States, Israel and China. Goldstein is a single mother in her 50s, and she and her daughter celebrate three New Year holidays: American, Jewish and Chinese.

Lily Ling, who was adopted at age 4 in 1997, decided that for her bat mitzvah party she wanted a Chinese theme: a room decorated in red and gold, Chinese food, bamboo centerpieces and maybe some reference to the Year of the Monkey, in which she was born. For girls like Lily Ling, being Jewish and Chinese means integrating different but complementary identities. The two go together, like yin and yang. "I'm happy I'm Jewish, and I'm happy I'm Chinese," Lily Ling said. Goldstein, who works in development for a college preparatory school, credits her daughter's sense of belonging in the Jewish community to her synagogue's openness. "Temple Isaiah believes that if your mother is Jewish, and you're raised as a Jew, then you are a Jew," she said.

Yet the question of whether a child adopted into a Jewish family will be universally accepted as Jewish frequently comes up in conversations with adoptive parents. Some see formal conversion as the answer. These parents immerse their adopted children in the mikvah, a ritual bath, immediately upon returning from China. They may see the ceremony as the culmination of the adoption process. Or they consider it a way to legitimize the Jewish identity of their child, so that no other Jew will question it. "I wanted to make them card-carrying Jews," said one mother who took her adopted daughters to the mikvah.

Other parents say they plan to perform conversion ceremonies before their daughters' bat mitzvahs, when the girls can actively participate in the ritual. Still others feel that no conversion is necessary.

Sari Steinberg, a 55-year-old social worker, "knew right away" that she would take her daughter to the mikvah after returning from China. At the ceremony, she passed out fortune cookies and mandel bread. "That's how we started our whole process of being both Chinese and Jewish," she said. Steinberg, a single mother, and her daughter, Molly, now 10, celebrate Jewish and Chinese holidays "equally." But sometimes, something has got to give. Molly used to take Chinese lessons, but as her schedule grew busier, she stopped going. Still, twice a week, Molly goes to Hebrew school, where she sits beside another Molly, who was also adopted from China on the same day.

Jews have adopted a significant number of children from China, in the view of some professionals in the adoption community. "It would appear that a lot of Jewish families are adopting Asian children," said Marcia Jindal, an intercountry adoption coordinator for Vista Del Mar Child and Family Services in Los Angeles. Jindal estimated that two out of 10 adoptions of Chinese children, facilitated by her agency, involved Jewish families. Jews adopt children from China for the same reasons others do, experts say. Women might be single or older or unable to give birth. China has many infants available for adoption, and the wait time has remained relatively short, typically about a year. Some families choose to adopt a girl, and China allows families to specify gender, Jindal said. And Chinese children have a reputation for being healthy, she added.

Beth Hall, co-author of "Inside Transracial Adoption" (Perspectives Press, 2000), said it takes a certain type of person to adopt a child of another ethnicity. "The kind of people who adopt transracially tend to be people who feel that they don't have to keep up with the Joneses," Hall said. "They can act outside the bounds of what might be 'normal' or 'OK' and get away with it, not have it ruin their ability to earn an income, to find happiness." Jews may bring an extra sensitivity to the table, Hall added. "If they've experienced anti-Semitism, they may be able to understand what it's like to experience racism in the way that a white gentile wouldn't," she said. Kirsten Hanson-Press, a 39-year-old adoption advocate in Los Angeles with a 2-year-old Chinese daughter, said she adopted from China after having adopted a Hispanic daughter. She wanted another child from a different culture. "Jews often feel an alliance with people of color," Hanson-Press said. "We have an affinity for the 'other.'"

Already, Hanson-Press has had to choose between sending her daughter to Chinese school or Hebrew school. She opted for Hebrew school. "My daughters would first identify as Jewish and secondly as Hispanic and Chinese," she said.

Still, Hanson-Press acknowledged that she worries about the future. How will her children react, for example, when they learn that many, perhaps most, Jews follow the tradition of matrilineal descent -- that is, they consider a person automatically Jewish only if their birth mother is Jewish. Hanson-Press recently requested a meeting with the religious school principal to talk about how to

support her children should others question their Jewishness.

Leslie Carter, who has a 2-year-old Chinese daughter, also expects challenges. "Everybody is very welcoming now," said Carter, a 46-year-old director of business development who attends a Chabad in San Diego. "How people would feel if she was older and their son wanted to marry her, I couldn't say." Carter recognizes that at some point, her daughter could "opt out of being Jewish, but she couldn't opt out of being Chinese."

Parents and children must reckon with this reality, said Jane Brown, an adoption expert who travels the country staging workshops for children. Brown has eight kids of her own, including five adopted from Asia. "Nobody in the world is going to look at that [adopted Asian] child and see her first as Jewish," Brown said. "That's the part they can shed if they want to. They can't shed race."

Ultimately, it may be adult adoptees from South Korea, which has long allowed international adoption, who offer the best glimpse into the future for Chinese children and their families. Julia Mendelson, a 23-year-old Korean adoptee, went to Jewish day school in New York from preschool through high school. She spent summers at Camp Young Judea. After high school, she lived in Israel for a year. But Mendelson remembers feeling different. When she would catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she dressed for synagogue, she recalls, her reflection would startle her. Surrounded by Caucasians, "you picture yourself as one of them," she said. Her parents invested tremendous effort trying to persuade her that she should be Jewish first, Mendelson said. They reminded her that her adoptive father's parents were Holocaust survivors. On a trip to Israel, her parents took her to an Ethiopian refugee camp to demonstrate that Jews were a diverse people.

But Mendelson had a hard time feeling "Jewish first," because "in society, you're Asian first." Mendelson recalls the turning point, when she saw herself as others see her. It was the day of her bat mitzvah, after the service, when she overheard a cousin say, "It just looks so wrong to see an Asian kid reading Torah." That moment "woke me up from denial," Mendelson said. Before, Judaism had felt natural. Afterward, she said, "I remember thinking how weird this must be for everybody here." After Mendelson started college, she began dating a Catholic Korean adoptee -- a situation that has caused tension between her and her parents. She would ideally like to marry a Jewish Korean, she said. But if she had to choose between Jewish and Korean, she would probably pick Korean. "I feel strong enough in my Jewish identity ... to pass it on to my children. I feel like I could handle that part," she said. "But I feel like I can't handle educating my kids about being Korean."

Adoptive parents, like all parents, are often unaware of the struggles their children face. Cynthia Goldberg, a 53-year-old vocational counselor in Davis, only recently learned that her 18-year-old Korean daughter experienced racial taunting growing up. "We were talking about elementary school the other day," Goldberg said, "and she told me about kids making fun of her face, saying that it was flat, that her glasses wouldn't stay up because she had a funny nose."

I said, "You never told me that." And she said, "Why would I tell you? You wouldn't have been able to do anything about it." "It's not about how you raise them," Goldberg concluded. "It's about how the world sees them."

As for Leah, the coming-of-age Chinese teenager -- the former baby by the riverbank -- when the world tells her, as it often does, "You don't look Jewish," she has a ready answer. "It's not about looking. It's just something you are," she says. A couple of years ago, Leah went back to China, to the riverbank where the villagers found her. Being there reminded her of Moses, whose mother set him adrift on the Nile River rather than drown him, as Pharaoh had commanded. "I thought, that's kind of like me," she said. Like Moses, Leah has a special connection to the Jewish people. Only "I'm hoping," she added, "I won't have to lead people across the Red Sea."

Waiting Outside the Promised Land

By Lesley Williams, June 21 2006, InterfaithFamily.com



One of my five-year-old daughter's favorite "Jewish" books isn't technically Jewish at all. It's titled *Let My People Go: Bible Stories Told by a Freeman of Color* and it recounts familiar Jewish Bible stories from the perspective of nineteenth century African Americans. In the cadence of southern black speech, the narrator compares Esther to a light-skinned African-American woman who rescues a group of slaves, Joseph to a slave boy who forgives the betrayal which caused him to be sold away from his family, and of course Moses to the black American slaves demanding their own freedom.

These stories have always meant a great deal to me, as they did to my father and grandparents, who lived and died in the hell that was the Jim Crow South. They are a part of what first drew me to Judaism as a child and to my eventual conversion at age thirty-three. I felt an immense attraction to Jews and Jewish values, especially the emphasis on ethics and right behavior, which I saw reflected in Jewish concern for social justice.

Being Jewish gives one the courage to be an outsider. For my conversion ceremony, I wrote a humorous list of "Top Ten Reasons for Converting to Judaism." The first was, "I wanted to make doubly sure I'd never get asked to join a country club." That shared experience of exclusion was part of the reason my parents had always had so many Jewish friends and were far more comfortable around Jews than around other whites. Given my history of connections and affinities to Judaism and Jews, I confidently expected to blend seamlessly into the Jewish community. So maybe I was a tad naive.

I belong to a good-sized Reconstructionist congregation in the Chicago suburbs. My daughter and I feel loved, appreciated, accepted; I've been asked to be on the board, played Esther in the Purim Shpiel, spoken at synagogue events, and had two essays published in congregational anthologies. I've even been granted the highest honor a Jewish female can receive: named co-chair of a synagogue fundraiser. Surely now I must feel that I belong? Well, not quite. There's always the odd incident that reminds me I am still an outsider.

High Holiday services, 2005. My wonderful rabbi, who has traveled to Uganda and Nigeria with World Jewish Service and is active in the Save Darfur campaign, is speaking about multiculturalism in Jewish life. He refers to Gary Tobin's work on Jewish racial diversity, to the Beta Israel, the Ibo, the Abayudaya. "Ours is a multiracial community!" he reminds us. "Why even here at our shul, we have African American members!" I cringe and slither lower in my seat, feeling the weight of 600 pairs of eyes. I've always thought it was hilarious that my fellow congregants proudly describe our congregation as "multiracial." I remember coming to shul one afternoon before my daughter was born, just as Sunday school was letting out. One of the moms smiled at me and said, "Oh, your daughter's on her way up!" Momentarily bemused ("what daughter?!") I then noticed Marissa, the only black child in the school, standing nearby, and it clicked. I explained that although I was quite fond of Marissa, she was not my daughter.

When there are so few black congregants that strangers automatically assume any two of them are related, it's not a multiracial congregation. Of course, this same scenario plays out occasionally when I attend predominantly white churches. Yet there is one big difference between being black at a synagogue and being black at a mainline Christian church. Christianity is a theology; Judaism is a theology and a peoplehood. Anyone can subscribe to a theology; there is nothing inherently white or black or European or Asian about it. And of course given the church's centuries of conquest, colonization and conversion, there are thriving, long-established Christian churches in all parts of the world. When I walk into a Christian church, no one questions my presence, my right to belong.

For an African-American, walking into a synagogue is a completely different story. Although I've had Jewish friends all my life, and attended my share of Bar Mitzvahs growing up, that first walk into Beth Emet, Beth Hillel, Or Torah was always intimidating, if not downright terrifying. I could feel the stares, like a physical weight. No matter how friendly the people were, I couldn't help but feel . . . conspicuous. The experience of being black in an environment where I don't "belong" is one of hypervisibility. Coupled with my insecurity about reading Hebrew and following protocol during services, my natural black paranoia was always switched on to full power.

In synagogue life, there are so many subtle reminders that the American Jewish world is primarily Ashkenazic. The emphasis on Yiddishkeit for example. To most Americans, Jewish and non-Jewish, Yiddish is the Jewish family language. Yiddish jokes color the synagogue newsletter and pepper the Purim shpiel. Although I dutifully bought and studied Every Goy's Guide to Common Jewish Expressions, using Yiddish always feels awkward, like I'm pretending to be someone I'm not. We "new Jews" feel a bit left out when the Yiddish jokes start flying at the oneg (informal light refreshments after a service), kind of like the unpopular kid at school who never got taught the secret code.

I wonder, how comfortable would a Beta Israel, or an Ibo or an Abayudaya family feel at a typical synagogue oneg? But questions of language and culture aside, African-American Jews must also contend with the weight of black/Jewish history. I was at a new members brunch several years ago, and we went around the room introducing ourselves. Many of those present were from Chicago's "old South Shore," a formerly Jewish community that succumbed to block busting and white flight in the 1960s and '70s. Ah, the fond remembrances! The nostalgia for those glory days! The sorrowful resignation for the unbearable ruin "they" had made of "our" neighborhood. Quietly I sat waiting my turn. At last I introduced myself. "My name is Lesley," I said, "and I'm from South Shore, too. I guess my parents moved there a little later than yours did." Dead silence.

Flash forward a few years. I was in a committee meeting with three friends and someone brought up Detroit. All three had lived in, or had relatives in Detroit back in the early sixties, you know . . . "when people still lived in Detroit." Again the fond remembrances, the nostalgia. "Such a shame, ah, I get sick when I think about it," "Such a beautiful place it used to be." I said nothing this time, just sat there seething. Detroit was where my parents honeymooned, where some of my relatives still live. It was so painful to sit there and hear it described as a hellhole by these women, all friends of mine, one of them my closest friend at shul.

Now of course, the urban centers of Chicago, Detroit, etc., suffered terribly during the upheavals of the sixties. However the bulk of that suffering was borne by African-Americans, not Jews. And you know, I'm tired of being made to feel that it's my fault, or my parents' fault, that urban Jews were exiled to the suburbs. I resent the unchallenged assumption that these former Jewish enclaves are now unlivable, horrible crime dens. They are poorer yes, although not completely; my parents' South Shore neighborhood is graced with three-story, beautifully maintained homes and yards, as relentlessly bourgeois as in any suburb. But even given the poverty and urban blight, these are neighborhoods, and "people" still live there. They just happen to be black.

I realize that these generalizations about black neighborhoods aren't unique to Jews, but here's one that is: the patronizing attitude that Jews are responsible for the success of the civil rights movement. The 1997 PBS documentary Blacks and Jews explored this issue: a Black veteran of the movement said, "Schwerner and Goodman, Goodman and Schwerner: I am so tired of hearing those boys' names. You'd think they was the only two ever strung up by the Klan."

The "movement" was actually a big reason for my conversion. It's great that Jews supported civil rights far out of proportion to their numbers, that they still tend to support progressive causes more than any other ethnic group except blacks. I see this as a reflection of Jewish ethics and it makes me extremely proud. And yet . . . not everyone was on board with Abraham Heschel and Rabbi Marx in Chicago's Lawndale. Not everyone was wild about open housing when it started to affect their own economic interests. A lot of the vaunted "coalition" was a quid pro quo, rather than pure altruism. There is nothing wrong with self-interest, but it doesn't require African-Americans to feel some everlasting debt of gratitude or humility towards their Jewish benefactors.

Here's a perception problem that Jews didn't cause, but that definitely plays a role in how blacks view the Jewish community. Almost in spite of ourselves, most American blacks feel a connection to Africa, and judge our government's treatment of Africa as a measure of its attitude towards African-Americans. Between 1962 and 1999 the U.S. government spent a total of \$52,640,800,000 on Sub-Saharan Africa. During the same period it spent \$123,384,200,000, more than twice as much, on one country: Israel. Recently, spending on Africa has increased: in 2003, the U.S. government spent \$3,303,300,000 on Sub Saharan Africa. Yet during the same period, it spent \$3,695,600,000 on Israel.

Now, we know about Israel's strategic importance, our one ally in the Middle East, the lone democracy, etc. but a fair-minded person has got to ask: how is this justified? Given the appalling human misery in much of Africa, how is it fair that a relatively prosperous country like Israel gets so much and Africa so much less? Given the populations involved, about 6,300,000 in Israel versus over 700 million in sub Saharan Africa, that's \$588 per capita versus \$4.71.

In reaching out to African-Americans, how do we address this question? What is the Jewish community doing to support human need in Africa? As we continue to support aid for Israel, are we also advocating for a fair share of U.S. aid to go to Africa? And how much private Jewish giving is directed towards Africa? I'm proud to say that my synagogue has made a sustained, sincere commitment to African causes: sending a task force to Uganda with the World Jewish Service, studying African Jewish communities in Sunday school, linking the genocides in Rwanda and the Sudan with our Yom Ha Shoah observances. It's important to me that my daughter sees these connections, sees her African heritage as a complement to her Jewish one. Yet I wonder; will she feel as comfortable in other synagogues when she grows up? Where will the promise of a Jewish upbringing leave her?

Given all my angst about finding a place in the Jewish community, you may wonder, why am I still a Jew? Because I believe. I believe blacks and Jews share an ethos that has profoundly affected my life. I believe both communities have important lessons for each other, and that blending these two identities will make my daughter a wiser and stronger person. I believe the Jewish community is generous and farsighted enough to adapt, to broaden its temple for the children of sharecroppers as well as shtetls.

Another African-American, who was fond of quoting the Jewish Bible, cited the Exodus story shortly before his death: Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind . . . I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. I'm still waiting for my promised land. And I pray that as a black Jewish adult, my daughter will find hers.

The Whole Story on Being Half-Jewish

By Sana Krasikov, June 16 2006, Forward.com



Half/Life: Jew-ish Tales From Interfaith
Homes
Edited by Laurel Snyder
Soft Skull Press, 280 pages, \$14.95.

Much has been written about intermarriage in America, from informal polls and academic research to vituperative op-eds and book-length explorations. And yet, a surprisingly small portion of this literature actually documents the stories and voices of people growing up in mixed families. So it is with a certain expectancy that one welcomes "Half/Life: Jewish Tales From Interfaith Homes," an anthology of essays, edited by Laurel Snyder, that examine the experience of growing up "half" in a religion where there is no in-between status.

One of the book's open objectives, as stated by Snyder in her introduction, is to encourage the Jewish community to open its arms to people who are Jews in an ethnic and cultural sense but not so in accordance with Jewish law, which relies on matrilineal descent. "More Jews are now intermarrying than marrying within the faith, which means that the so-called Dilemma of Intermarriage will represent, in a generation, a giant population among Jews," Snyder writes. "How will the Jewish community turn its ship around to welcome these half-Jews when for generations many of the half-Jews have been silently tolerated or excluded outright?" There is no agenda for theological change here; the book, she writes, seeks to provide no answers but rather varied perspectives of people trying to explore their Jewish and non-Jewish roots, and attempting to answer questions about the legitimacy of their own identities.

Most of the essayists are children of the 1970s, that culturally utopian moment in American history in which the idealism of the counterculture brought about a tapering off of religious traditionalism and more assimilation. In many of these stories, it is the Jewish parent's attitude that is the more indifferent or critical toward Judaism, suggesting it wasn't simply intermarriage in itself that led to more secular attitudes in the kids, but an upbringing by a parent who already felt at odds with Judaism. For these parents, the break from religion was often entangled with a more personal break from family and ideology, or a part of a search for independence. For their children, however, the experience of secularism was quite different. "What was for [my parents] a moderately countercultural movement away from the organized religions of their eras, if not their immediate families, was for us more of a whitewash," Rebecca Wolff writes. "It seemed quite clear, quite obvious, quite self-evident to us, my brother and me walking down Seventh Avenue dragging our backpacks over subway gratings, that religious beliefs were, simply, idiotic...."

And yet, for others, growing up "without religion" (or with only its cultural elements) did not mean that frameworks of meaning and faith were out of reach. "I think I was raised to see that untrodden path as the most righteous," Thisbe Nissen writes while discussing the modern-day tendency to invent one's own religion — a sort of me-ism of personal philosophy and ritual. "Sometimes I'm not sure what the difference is between my reliance on the tasks of my life — writing, teaching, growing vegetables, making art — and my grandmother's reliance on the tasks of hers, the prayer, the kosher kitchen, the observance. I feel like I'm doing right in the world by growing organic vegetables. My grandmother felt she was doing right by keeping kosher. I know one seems a lot more rational to me than the other, but that's because I believe what I believe. Which may be to say this: it's not that I don't get religion. It's just that mine's the only one that makes any sense to me, and I'm its only congregant."

In a number of cases, the Jewish parent's identification with Judaism becomes stronger over time, or after a marriage with the non-Jewish spouse breaks up. In their middle-age and older years, the parents "return" in some sense to their roots, while their children remain adrift between religions and identities, never having had something from which to rebel in the first place. Or, as Emma Snyder describes her feeling after her parents' divorce, "Suddenly I wasn't Jewish in the absence of religion, I was Jewish in the middle of two religions."

Terry Barr, the son of a Jewish man and a Christian woman, felt similarly caught between the two, though he ultimately positioned himself more squarely on the Christian side. Growing up somewhat estranged from his Jewish relatives, Barr persists that he nevertheless "felt different from everybody else that I knew." In an essay that is by turns self-reproachful and self-justifying, Barr writes about coming to the decision not to bury his father in a Jewish cemetery — a choice that went against his grandmother's wishes. "This might be wrong," he writes, "but I don't think so. What I couldn't say was this: Life had been too confusing already, too torn. When both of you are gone how could I face going from one cemetery to another? Despite all your problems together

and with each other, in the end you remained married, and that comforts me even now. And if the gentile side of us claims him in death, so what? We know who he was."

One can sympathize with the personal reasons behind such a decision. But in the absence of the even basic Jewish practices, like burying one's dead in a Jewish cemetery — those practices that essentially separate Jews from non-Jews — one has to ask exactly what it means to "feel different," to "feel Jewish"? For many, "feeling Jewish" means little more than a certain self-approval of personal idiosyncrasies like bargain hunting, hypochondria or a craving for latkes. Or alternatively, feeling an affinity for a Jewishness that defines itself only in opposition to persecutors. As Daphne Gottlieb notes, her friends have told her that she is only Jewish when an anti-Semitic joke is told. It is to the book's credit that the majority of the essays deal frankly with the choices and compromises involved in merging Judaism with secular and Christian culture. And though many individual essays are liable to touch some raw nerves, collectively they give an honest picture of the complexity of family life.

There are occasionally some very funny moments: a mother begging her already pregnant daughter to have her marriage officiated by a rabbi, only to have the daughter snap back that her mother should be grateful she's even having a wedding; an aunt dubbing every personal enemy, including a member of her own Jewish family, as "a real Hitler"; a hip city teenager infuriating her father by trying to sport a yarmulke as a fashion statement. On the whole, however, the book is not a lighthearted or kitschy celebration of diversity. The more common feelings are those of confusion and embitterment, especially at efforts to explore one's Jewish identity, and at finding that one's claims to it are treated with skepticism by practicing Jews. For others, even the early knowledge of their parents' union not being recognized by a family rabbi is a sore memory of rejection. But the deeper frustration is not simply one of being rejected by "real" Jews, but of being forced to choose at all.

Maya Gottfried, one essayist who wasn't uncomfortable choosing, writes, "I very badly wanted to have a religious identity." Attempting an investigation of her roots, she learns that, despite having three Jewish grandparents, she is not considered Jewish according to Jewish law. "The next logical move," Gottfried explains, "was to investigate the other side of my spiritual family tree." Eventually she underwent baptism and became a practicing Christian. But choice comes at an emotional cost. In the final scene of the essay, Gottfried is eating dinner with her father in a bright restaurant on New York's Upper East Side. Her father quietly asks her to cover up the cross she is wearing around her neck. Though she wishes for him to understand her decision, she allows him his feelings. "And oddly," she writes, "it feels good on some level that he wants me to stay within his faith."

Maybe one way to answer the question of what it is to be "half" is that it means to have been passed down both the heritage and the doubts. As Snyder aptly puts it in her introduction, "Half doesn't necessarily mean you were always wounded or always unhappy. It doesn't mean you have terrible issues to face. It only means that somewhere along the line, you had to figure things out for yourself."

JEWISH COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

Houston, We Have an Ethiopian Representative

By Danny Adino Ababa, June 6 2006, Ynetnews.com



Aviva Dego and Yerushalayim Bicha, both 15-year-old girls originally from Ethiopia, were chosen to represent Israel at NASA space camp in Turkey. Yerushalayim: I'm thrilled about our success and that finally you can hear something good about immigrants from Ethiopia

While your kids are getting bored at home over the summer break, Aviva Dego and Yerushalayim Bicha, 15, will spend the summer at the NASA space camp in Turkey. The two gifted teens participated in a special project to advance adolescents who immigrated from Ethiopia in the fields of science and technology.

The aim of the project, which was initiated by the Jewish Agency, is to train participants for advanced studies in technology and to ease their absorption into the employment market. In the framework of the project, the young participants travel to the Weizmann Institute or the Technion twice a week, where they study advanced Physics, Mathematics, Chemistry, and Biology and meet with university students.

'I am happy to represent Israel'

Aviva and Yerushalayim, who excel in their studies, were chosen by the Jewish Agency to represent Israel at the NASA International Space Camp in Turkey.

This coming Sunday, the two will pack their bags and set off to their destination abroad – their first time leaving Israel since they immigrated. Together with youth from around the world, the girls will spend two weeks carrying out scientific experiments and will even simulate a flight to the moon.

Aviva and Yerushalayim, who are both entering the tenth grade, are very excited for the trip. Aviva, who lives in Rehovot, came to Israel with her family when she was three months old. "I'm very excited for my first time leaving the country and for the fact that I'll be representing Israel," she said.

Yerushalayim, who lives in Rishon Letzion, immigrated to Israel six years ago. "I have an advantage over Aviva," she said. "I flew (in a plane) six years ago when I came to Israel, and I still remember how you sit in a plane. She's more excited than I am, but I'll help her get used to it. I'm very happy about our success and that finally you can hear something good about immigrants from Ethiopia. I am happy to represent Israel, and even more than that, to represent my community."

Kosher Curry Expansion

By Cara Wides, June 12 2006, SomethingJewish.co.uk



A kosher Indian restaurant Kavanna has recently opened in Hendon, north west London and a range of kosher curry paste, poppadoms and pickles are now available in Barnet supermarkets for the first time. They will be well received by the 1000-strong Indian Jewish community who live in the Hendon/Golders Green area, many of whom go to local Sephardi Synagogues.

Another kosher Indian restaurant is to open soon, run by Richard Moses of Hendon. Mr Moses is also responsible for supplying local kosher stores with the Simtom Indian food products. He has a good knowledge of Indian cuisine, because his parents were both born in Burma and lived in India before coming to England. "My restaurant has a talented Indian chef, who is able to cook authentic food, adapting traditional Indian recipes so they are kosher. For example, there will be no prawn curries, and no chicken dishes involving yogurt," said Mr Moses.

There may not be any kosher Indian restaurants in the UK, but there is a kosher and Indian bakery in Hendon run by Nathan Moses, a Jewish man who came to London from India in 1978. Before this date he lived in Israel for over 10 years. His family were able to settle in England as they had dual nationality (Indian and British), because India used to be a British colony. Nathan Moses became manager of the David Bakery in Vivian Avenue, Hendon, 10 years ago. It is a good place to see the two different cuisines side by side.

Jewish breads such as bagels and pastries are sold next to samosas, barias (deep fried patties made of onion, potatoes, chickpea flour and spices), pilau rice, vegetable korma and dhal. "There are some similarities between Jewish and Indian culture. As well as food playing a central role, discipline, education, and respect are important to both groups," he says.

Rabbi Abraham David has roots in India and Burma, and leads a congregation made up of a high percentage of Indian Jews, at the Od Yosef Hai Synagogue in Hendon. "You will sometimes hear Hindi spoken in the synagogue," he chuckles. "I often speak it to the older generation to make them feel at home."

Those are the people who were born or lived in India, as opposed to their children who may have been born in England. Rabbi Abraham thinks that Indian Jews in Hendon feel they are more Jewish than Indian. "When they lived in India they had their own food and their own customs - they didn't absorb much culture. They never had any problems, and were not persecuted at all."

He concludes that Indian Jews in Hendon are more easy going than the Anglo-Jews, and they are generally very hospitable group, who visit each others' homes a lot. Warmth and a strong sense of community are therefore similar traits between Anglo-Jews and Indian-Anglo-Jews - who also share a love of food.

Shalom Bombay

By Payal Kapadia, July 10 2006, OutlookIndia.com



Celebrity chef Moshe Shek knows what it's like to be Jewish in India. He found his calling in the Promised Land, but he couldn't call it home. After working in an Israeli kibbutz kitchen at 21, he returned to hometown Mumbai and went to catering college. But when he emigrated to Israel years later as a seasoned chef, he felt like an outsider. "I am Jewish by religion, but I am culturally Indian, not Israeli," he says. "I returned to India because I am completely at home here."

On the other hand, computer engineer Elkan Palkar says he feels at home in India, but still wants to emigrate to Israel. "I plan to learn the language and begin a new life in my fatherland and, if required, fight for it too," he says.

For India's 4,480 Jews—80 per cent of whom live in Mumbai—life is an eternal toss-up between settling down in Israel like Jews the world over, or staying on in India. Even though emigration is significantly down from the post-Independence years—there was a mass exodus after the formation of Israel in 1948—Mumbai's Jews are still a shrinking community. Both the Bene-Israelis, who were shipwrecked off the Konkan coast 2,000 years ago, and the Baghdadi Jews—merchants who fled oppression in Iraq in the 18th century—are going all out to keep, as Jewish author Esther David puts it, "the young within the fold".

At the city's synagogues, Jewish boys are learning to blow the shofar—the ceremonial ram's horn that brings all Jews together—and to speak Hebrew. At Thane's Gate of Mercy Synagogue, the 80-year-old mikveh (ritual bath) has been revived so that young Jewish women can purify themselves after a menstrual cycle.

Outside the synagogues, community organisations encourage the young Jewish diaspora to build a strong community in India. For instance, the Indian wing of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Centre (AJDC) encourages the young to perform the Tzedekah, literally meaning righteousness. This righteousness takes many forms: preparing packed meals twice daily for destitute Jewish couples abandoned by their emigre children; visiting them regularly, even celebrating their birthdays with them. It also runs the Birthright Program, where young Jews are sent on their first trip to Israel, fully sponsored.

Conservative practices have a surprisingly strong following among young Indian Jews. Teenage brothers Nathaniel and Avniel Jhirad have no qualms about switching off the electricity on Sabbath, even if it means studying in the sweltering heat without air-conditioning. Palkar turned down a plum job with Reliance because it required him to work on Saturdays. "I want a young bride of pure Jewish blood," he says.

But there are other studies in contrast, like Israel Phansapurkar, 20, who went to Israel for 10 days on the Birthright Program. "They took us around, told us we could always come there," says Israel. "But India is home." Film writer Bunny Reubens echoes the sentiment more strongly: "As a youngster I have starved myself and prayed non-stop for over 24 hours on the Day of Atonement...but I consider myself more Indian and I adore Mumbai. I remain connected to my Jewish background and traditions, but if asked to choose, I'll take India any day."

In a quiet village in Alibaug, up the coast from Mumbai, David Reuben Vaskar, the last of the Jewish oil-pressers, feels the same way. Two of his sons moved to Israel 13 years ago, but Vaskar has no intention of even visiting. "What have they got going there?" he scoffs. "They can't even send Rs 200 a month to their papa."

Truth is, Vaskar is doing better business than his Israel-based sons—he owns five coconut wadis and a carpentry workshop on the side. The 73-year-old wrings the oil out of oilseeds, as his Bene-Israeli ancestors have always done, generation after generation, over the last 2,000 years. Not much has changed, he says in fluent Marathi, except that the bullocks are gone and it's all mechanised now. Vaskar's grey eyes and lighter skin still set him apart from the other villagers of this Maharashtrian coastal hamlet. There's also the Star of David that marks the outer facade of his home; and the weekly visits to the 200-year-old local synagogue, family in tow.

Vaskar's ancestors fled Jerusalem two millennia ago after the fall of King Solomon's second temple to the Romans. Shipwrecked off Alibaug, the early arrivals took to the local occupation of oil-pressing, soon coming to be known as 'Shanwar Telis' (Saturday oilmen) because of their observance of the Sabbath. In time, they adopted village surnames with the suffix 'kar' and discovered that coconut milk could be used for cooking—without breaking kosher laws about mixing meat and milk. Besides coconut, kokum, tamarind and saffron too found a safe place in the Bene-Israeli kitchen.

Instances of how the Bene-Israeli Jews imbibed Indian influences abound—from mehndi ceremonies at Jewish weddings to the publication of Marathi-language prayer books and the presence of a picture of Prophet Elijah in almost every Jewish home, even though the Jewish religion forbids display and worship of images. One thing that has survived intact is a collective memory of the 'Shema Israel' prayer—"Hear o Israel, the Lord our God is one."

It's the same prayer that Vaskar teaches his grandchildren. For 2,000 years since that legendary shipwreck, the Shema has been passed on orally, from father to son, from mother to daughter. What enabled the Bene-Israeli Jews, India's largest and oldest Jewish community, to maintain their faith in isolation from Jews worldwide? Esther David calls it "nothing short of a miracle". India is the only country in the world, she adds, where the Jews escaped persecution of any sort. (Incidentally, they are still to be recognised as a minority.)

In fact, the Bene-Israelis were so divorced from mainstream Judaism, they were spared from experiencing—or even comprehending entirely—the single shared experience that binds Jews worldwide: the Holocaust. Does that make them less Jewish? Far from it. Instead, it turns on its head the notion of Jews as a homogeneous, and persecuted, lot.

"I feel more Jewish in Bombay than in Israel," says celeb chef Moshe Shek " Mumbai's Jews are far from homogeneous. The Baghdadis had been trading in India for centuries, but they settled in Mumbai long after the Bene-Israelis adapted to Konkan ways. Commercial interests drew their leader David Sassoon to India in 1832. Sassoon, and more so his sons after him, built the Magen David Synagogue, the Kennyseth Eliahu Synagogue, the David Sassoon Library, the Sassoon Docks, the Jacob Sassoon School, the Sassoon Mills etc. There are no Sassoons in India now, but the very face of Mumbai is a memorial to them.

While the Baghdadi Jews flourished under the British Raj, the Bene-Israelis came to a rapidly growing Mumbai in search of work. Suddenly thrown together, their relations were uneasy at best. "The Baghdadis were an orthodox sect," ventures Solomon Sofer, Sassoon Trust chairman, "they weren't sure of the antecedents of the Bene-Israelis, who had lived here for centuries."

Benjamin Isaac, a Bene-Israeli from the community organisation ORT, puts it less diplomatically: "The Baghdadis were pro-British and looked down upon the sari-wearing, cricket-playing Bene-Israelis who sided with the rebels during the Indian nationalist movement."

For film journalist Bunny Reubens' grandfather, the rift between the two communities meant changing his surname from Nagavkar to Reubens in the early 1920s to appear more western to his potential employers, the Sassoons. Former model Rachel Reubens, raised by a Bene-Israeli father and a Baghdadi-Jewish mother, only became conscious of the divide after her mother's death. "It hit me like a brick," she recalls. "My sister and I were walking through the cemetery...even that was divided."

The gulf has narrowed in recent years. With no more than 80 Baghdadi Jews in the city, the community depends upon the Bene-Israelis to get religious quorum—10 Jewish males—for services. At the city's Baghdadi synagogues, where Bene-Israelis were once denied the honour of conducting services, all the hazzan (priests) are now Konkan Jews.

The fallout of emigration, though, is felt deeply. AJDC migration records say 52 Indian Jews emigrated to Israel in 2005; another 21 by May this year. It's hard going for young Indian Jews to find marriage partners within their community. Inter-faith marriages are on the rise, and although conversions were traditionally looked upon sternly, it is not unusual for synagogues to conduct them these days. Sabbath services in Mumbai are often poorly attended, synagogues have closed down after standing empty for years.

Not everything is rosy in the Promised Land either, as Moshe Shek found out. The economy is reeling under inflation, and there is the constant security threat posed by the Palestinian uprising. Add to that the 'discrimination' against the darker Sephardic Jews, and one can see why it isn't easy going for the 60,000 Indian Jews living there. "I feel more Jewish in Mumbai than I did in Israel," says Shek, whose restaurant, Moshe's, observes Jewish dietary laws.

Like Moshe, other emigres like Vaskar's sons are now considering returning to India. Others have realised that although life in Israel isn't easy, it's a stepping stone to their final target of settling down in the West. But even for them, the India connection is alive. Every year, thousands of Indian Jews from all over Israel flock to Illat for the Hoduya festival (hodu means Indian) with its Indian cultural events. In the late '90s, a Marathi Sahitya Sammelan was organised in Israel. On May 1 this year, Indian Jews in Israel sang Marathi songs in a celebration of Maharashtra Day. Mai Boli, a Marathi language quarterly printed in Israel, is quite popular among the diaspora.

Maharashtra—and Mumbai—have a special significance for India's Jews, both here and abroad. The late poet Nissim Ezekiel—Indian Judaism's most well-known face—knew it only too well. "He came and stayed with me," remembers scholar Shalva Weil, of Jerusalem's Hebrew University. "But he loved Mumbai and he couldn't live without it."

Once Thriving Jewish Community in Suriname is Struggling

By Larry Luxner, June 23 2006, JTA

Until recently, Paramaribo had two ancient synagogues famous for their distinctive architecture and sand-covered floors. Hard times, however, forced the shrinking Jewish community several years ago to lease out the smaller of the two shuls, Tzedek V'Shalom, for \$3,500 a month. Once all the Jewish ritual objects inside were removed and shipped off to Israel's Diaspora Museum, a local computer firm converted the Sephardi synagogue into an Internet cafe.

"We rented it out because we need the money. A small community like this can't afford two synagogues," says Jules Donk, president of the remaining congregation, Neve Shalom. "We just couldn't maintain it anymore."

Beginning more than 350 years ago, the former Dutch colony on the northern fringes of the Amazon was a haven for persecuted Jews. Now its Jewish community, comfortable as ever in this diverse country, is struggling, hurt by dwindling funds and membership. "We're the oldest existing Jewish community in the Americas, but the rest of the Jewish world doesn't care about us," says Lilly Duym, who manages Neve Shalom. "We don't get any help, that's why we had to close the other synagogue and rent out the building. Otherwise, we'd have no income."

Since 1975, when the Netherlands cut loose its former colony, annual per-capita GDP has fallen precipitously, and most of the hundreds of thousands of Surinamese who fled to Holland after independence — including most of the Jews — never returned.

The country is still recovering from the effects of a civil war that raged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As in many countries, drug trafficking has become a serious problem, as has crime, which the locals blame on itinerant Brazilian gold-miners. Yet unlike the rest of South America — which is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic — religion in Suriname takes many forms. Amazingly, everyone gets along. "No religion in Suriname has any problem with any other religion," says Guido Robles, a prominent Jewish businessman in Paramaribo. "All the problems are caused by the politicians."

Portuguese-speaking Sephardi Jews first came to Suriname around 1660 — before the Dutch — to escape the Inquisition in neighboring Brazil. They prospered in the new climate of tolerance, and many Jews became wealthy slave owners. The ruins of the B'racha V'Shalom synagogue, built in 1685, still attract researchers and archaeologists to Jodensavanna, a site deep in Suriname's sparsely populated wilderness south of Paramaribo.

Thanks to heavy immigration from India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, about 27 percent of Suriname's 480,000 inhabitants today profess Hinduism. That makes it the leading religion, though Islam is also prominent, due to the colonial practice of importing laborers from the Indonesian island of Java to work the rice paddies and sugar plantations. There also are Dutch Protestants and Chinese Buddhists, as well as Creoles, Maroons and Amerindians.

Duym said she's never experienced anti-Semitism. In fact, Suriname's 200 or so remaining Jews are highly respected members of the community. A number of words of distinctly Hebrew origin have even crept into Sranantongo, the local dialect, such as "abuda kaba" (hard work) and "treef" (forbidden food).

"Cultural diversity is one of Suriname's most important assets, though it's not often recognized as such," says Albert Ramdin, assistant secretary-general of the Organization of American States. "For a long time, that diversity was used to polarize Surinamese politics. But that's over now, and it's a good thing."

Nowhere is this diversity more striking than along Paramaribo's Keizerstraat, where Congregation Neve Shalom and the adjacent Suriname Islamic Society mosque coexist peacefully.

The Javanese mosque is the largest of hundreds scattered throughout Suriname, but Neve Shalom — built in 1719 and rebuilt in 1835 after a fire — is the only functioning synagogue left in the country.

"We have respect for each other's culture," says Robles, who's also chairman of the Jodensavanna Foundation. "If you grow up with that as a kid, you're used to it and you don't ask questions. One friend is Hindustani, another one is Javanese, another is Creole. You respect it and enjoy it. When we have important holidays like Passover, the Muslims get invited and vice-versa." Passover attracts more Jews to the synagogue than any other holiday. Hundreds of people attend Neve Shalom's community seder.

Duym, whose grandfather came from Holland as a soldier when Suriname was still Dutch Guiana, says the last rich Jew died a year ago, and nearly all the remaining Jews are poor. "All the other rich Jews left, so we can't afford to pay a rabbi," she says.

At one recent Friday-night service, 28 people sat on Neve Shalom's wooden benches; on a recent Shabbat morning, four people

showed up to pray. To preserve its future in the face of dwindling numbers and proselytizing, Neve Shalom gradually has gone from Orthodox to liberal, accepting mixed-marriage couples and non-Jews. But that hasn't helped. Today, the congregation has only 125 members.

Donk isn't optimistic about the future of Judaism in Suriname. But he's not ready to throw in the towel just yet. "We've never had any problems in Suriname. Jews have been welcome here since the 18th century, and there was never a problem," Donk says. Asked about Tzedek V'Shalom, the community leader insists: "It's impossible for us to maintain right now, but we won't ever sell it. Maybe someday it will become a synagogue again. You never know."

A Balkan Revival: Jewish Culture Looks to the Young

By Brian Murphy, July 17 2006, The Associated Press

The beach club scene was in full swing: people dancing barefoot, flirting and ordering rounds of cool drinks. Welcome to a gathering on reviving Jewish culture in the Balkans. "We try to think young. It all depends on young people to make it happen," said Yair Kamaisky, one of the directors of a program to rebuild Jewish culture and religious life across Europe's most unstable corner.

The effort -- overseen by an international Jewish group -- is one of many campaigns to assist struggling Jewish communities in the former Eastern bloc and other nations, such as Greece and Turkey. But the style of this program sets a new course by aiming at a specific demographic -- young and influential professionals, or as one participant described it, "yuppies with yarmulkes."

"These are the people who have the energy and interest to lead a Jewish revival," Kamaisky said during a three-day meeting known as a "gesher" -- Hebrew for "bridge" -- in May at a seaside resort village in northern Greece. It was a mix of spring break, spiritual retreat, cultural immersion and high-energy networking.

The music blasting at the hotel pool drifted from rap by 50 Cent to Israeli folk songs. On the Jewish sabbath, more than 300 young people in their 20s and 30s observed customs that forbid use of electricity or machinery beginning at Friday sundown. For many, it was the first taste of a fully orthodox Shabbat.

Earlier, at a beach club down the road, singles took part in a version of The Dating Game. The reason, said meeting coordinator Diego Ornique, is exactly what it seems: a chance to play matchmaker. Inter-religious marriage and emigration have cut deeply into many Jewish communities, from the Danube River to the Aegean and Black seas, leaving them with populations that range from up to 15,000 in Romania to just 250 in Macedonia. "Sure, we hope to spark some romance," said Ornique, a Paris-based liaison for the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which runs the Balkan project with funding help from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation in Owings Mills, Md.

"I guess you could say the base for any revival is Jewish couples raising Jewish children with Jewish traditions." But other issues require more pressing attention.

Reclaiming property

Jewish groups across the Balkans have waged legal battles to reclaim property once held by Holocaust victims or confiscated by governments. In one of the most high-profile cases, Bulgaria's highest court opened hearings in May on a suit filed by a Jewish organization for nearly half ownership rights to a prominent hotel in Sofia. In 1943, the Bulgarian government confiscated most Jewish property, including a Jewish school that formerly occupied the hotel site. There also are worries of anti-Jewish sentiment being fed by extremists groups such as Serbia's National Order neo-Nazi faction and Greece's ultra-nationalist Golden Dawn.

"Yes, there are old prejudices and beliefs about Jews," said Dr. Alek Oscar, a 26-year-old neurologist in Sofia, the hub for Bulgaria's nearly 7,000 remaining Jews. "But we are not about looking back. We are about trying to create a new model and new network for Jews across the Balkans."

A group that Oscar helps direct, Shalom, has started a business course for teenagers and an Internet chat room. Volunteers take part in an outreach program for Gypsies, also known as Roma, one of the most discriminated groups in the region. They, too, were targeted in the Holocaust.

"Our experiences have taught us what it's like to be a persecuted minority," Oscar said.

Region's history

Judaism has been present in the Balkans since antiquity, but a major immigration began in the late 15th century when Jews expelled from Christian Iberia traveled to the European footholds of the Ottoman Empire, where Muslim rulers were generally more tolerant. By the early 20th century, there were more than 2 million Jews across the Balkans and some cities, such as Thessaloniki, were regarded as important centers of Jewish culture and commerce.

The Holocaust wiped out entire communities and even in places generally spared -- such as Nazi ally Bulgaria, which resisted sending Jews to concentration camps -- postwar emigration to Israel and the United States drained the population. Those who remained in the Soviet orbit came under pressure to abandon Jewish culture and traditions. Today, there are an estimated 70,000 Jews across the Balkans -- in addition to thousands of Israelis who started arriving in the 1990s in search of business opportunities.

ARTS & CULTURE

15 People Who Make America Great

The Artist: Aaron Dworkin, Sphinx Organization

By A. Christian Jean, July 3-10 2006, Newsweek



A violinist whose life is introducing the music he loves to inner-city children.

Growing up in rural Hershey, Pa., Aaron Dworkin was something of a double oddity: a black kid with a violin in his hand. There was only one other black family in town, and they looked nothing like Dworkin's household. He was adopted and raised by Jewish parents. His birthmother is Irish Catholic; his father is black. Diversity is literally in his blood. So picking up a violin at the age of 5 was just one more thing that made him different. It wasn't until college, though, that he realized how special it made him. At the University of Michigan, a music professor introduced him to the work of African-American composer William Grant Still. "I was overwhelmed," says Dworkin, 35. "No one ever told me this music existed. It would enrich so many people in the minority community. I thought, Why aren't they hearing it, too?"

Suddenly, Dworkin's mission in life emerged: diversifying America's symphonies—and their musical repertoires. "You can't complain about something," he says, "unless you're doing something about it." So in 1996 he founded the Sphinx Organization, a Detroit-based nonprofit aimed at drawing young black and Latino kids into the world of classical music. From a shoestring start, Sphinx now has a yearly budget of \$2 million. It has helped about 45,000 students in 100 schools and awarded \$800,000 in scholarships. Two years ago kids from Sphinx played Carnegie Hall. Last year Dworkin won a "genius" grant from the MacArthur Foundation.

With the help of an eight-person staff, Dworkin runs a weekend camp for urban kids, teaching them music theory, history and basic instruction on a variety of instruments. Sphinx also pays for 40 exceptional young musicians to attend an intensive music camp in New England. "Playing an instrument improves test scores and teaches discipline," Dworkin notes. The organization's signature creation is its annual string competition. Winners can earn up to \$10,000, tour the country, perform with the New York Philharmonic and get airtime on PBS and NPR. Alumni of the competition have landed jobs at big-city orchestras. From the roughest parts of Detroit to center stage at Lincoln Center—it seems hard to imagine. Says Dworkin, "Even what I was envisioning back then is not what it's become." That's because he didn't settle for envisioning his dream. He made it reality.

Psalm-Thing to Sing About in New Album

By Karla Blume, June 30 2006, The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles



Have you ever thought about what makes a good song? The Virginia-born Miri Hunter Haruach, who lives in Los Angeles, is a folk singer, playwright, student of Judaism and proud purveyor of a doctorate in women's studies, and she believes that to make a good song, you need a little some of this and a little Psalm of that. Haruach has always used her art to discuss the strengths and plights of women, but this time, with the release of her second album, "The Ways of Love," she takes the strong and ethical messages of the Book of Psalms and sets them to music for a new audience to discover.

Haruach sings with a modesty and softness that enhances the simple and good-natured spiritual messages of her songs. That, in itself, is an unusual trait, because audiences have come to expect artists who make spiritual/new age, religious music to have overproduced studio performances. Haruach doesn't make herself the main attraction of the album. The verses are intertwined

with laid-back melodies and sparse, single-riff drumbeats that add an interesting feeling of emptiness and sorrow to the otherwise uplifting words of wisdom.

In the title track, "Teach Me the Ways of Love," Haruach chants, "Open your eyes, let your ears hear the cry, unchain your mind from the bondage of shame, deliver your spirit, and set your soul free." The nuances of her delivery are accompanied by a rhythmic rap in Hebrew by an Israeli poet, known only as Ofer, who translated the meaning of the song into an interesting lyrical loop.

"The album is actually based on the Book of Psalms. I have been reading the Psalms since I was a child. The ideas and themes stick with you. They cover all of the aspects of life, including joy, sorrow, ecstasy, repentance, confusion, acceptance, marriage and separation," she says. The song, "It Would Be Enough," is the only one based on the Song of Songs, and Haruach was given it to read as a punishment in the 11th grade, she says. In the process, she "fell in love with it."

Haruach did take the liberty of interpreting the Psalms, not singing them verbatim, but updating them in hopes of reaching more people. Many of the songs are not gender specific, so she could be as inclusive as possible with the audience. None of that sentiment of inclusion is really surprising when you learn that Haruach is not only a converted Jew but also a mix of African American, European and Native American cultures.

"I was born a Southern Baptist, and I was really into going to church, because I liked to participate in the music aspect of the religious experience," she says. "Then I had 12 years of Catholic school and moved around a lot, writing plays, getting degrees and teaching Israeli folk dancing at Berkeley Hillel."

In fact, it wasn't until 1994 that Haruach became interested in Judaism, a move provoked by reading a book on kabbalah.

"I was drawn to Judaism because I felt that it was a religion of life rather than death," she says. "Through the music, dance and teachings of the Mizrahi Jews, I found a roadmap for living in this world." And although Haruach refers to herself as a convert, she has not yet taken the big plunge of being bat mitzvahed. "But that's coming eventually," she notes. "I did a Conservative conversion, although now I consider myself a Reconstructionist. I am considering cantorial studies, too."

In addition to her interest in music — psalms or otherwise — Haruach has also devoted much of her life to writing plays. The strong and determined women in her performances range from her own slave ancestors to the mysteries surrounding the enigmatic figure of the Queen of Sheba. "As much as we're engaged in the media, we don't see a lot of strong women. It's important for us as women to portray ourselves as strong so that the strife of our ancestors won't have been in vain." It would be an interesting twist, if someday Haruach's descendants were writing plays about her.

Black Eyed Peas' Zionist Message

By Israel Highway Staff, June 29 2006, IsraelHighway.org



The "Black Eyed Peas" provided the "feel good" concert of the summer so far. The group has won many fans around the world - and in Israel - for its innovative and culturally-aware brand of music. During the "Peas" concert in Jaffa, bandmembers described how they became great fans of Israel. "We've been here for five days," vocalist-rapper Will.I.Am told the crowd. "And that's been the best five days of our lives. Check this out," he went on, ticking off the ways he found himself loving the country, from the landscape to the tight-knit character of family life, to "the most beautifullest women on the planet." BEP even spoke about the possibility of moving to Israel. "Y'see, I brought my mom and my grandma. You know, we're Christian, but I think I'm gonna convert to Judaism ..." The gushing praise of everything Israeli came from individuals who, like most people in America, see Israel only through the images of war broadcast on the news back home. Will.I.Am said, "All we hear about you on TV is bad news. This is the first time I'm here and it looks to me like the most beautiful land on earth."

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