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Be'chol Lashon Newsletter • August 2007

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The Be'chol Lashon newsletter contains items of interest from worldwide Jewish communities. It serves to further educate isolated Jewish individuals and communities about the policies and practices of the mainstream Jewish community and to educate Jews in the mainstream about others with whom they may not be familiar.

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ABAYUDAYA COMMUNITY UPDATES

We are delighted to update you on the rapid progress of the Abayudaya Community Health and Development Plan. Everyday we hear exciting news about the work taking place in Uganda. We will continue to keep you updated. To read the previous updates, please [click here](#).

Nabagoye Water Update



Abayudaya Executive Council Chairman, Israel Siriri, led a water tap inauguration ceremony.

The tap is for use by all the neighbors of the Abayudaya community in Nabagoye. The water source is the newly drilled Nabagoye borehole, located 400 feet from the water tap. After the inauguration, village health workers performed a song and dance about the importance of water and pledged to help maintain the water tap.

To read the complete update, [click here](#).

The Abayudaya Jewish community of Uganda is achieving their goal of connecting with Jews around the world to ensure their survival and security. The leadership is focused on building the infrastructure to improve healthcare and develop businesses to provide community revenue. These efforts will benefit all residents of their sub-county, including Jews, Christians, and Muslims, therefore promoting peace and security in the region.

This inspirational project is becoming a reality through your generosity. To donate now, [click here](#)

EVENTS & COMMUNITY UPDATES

High Holidays at Indian Jewish Congregation of USA



Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Simchat Torah Services The Indian Jewish Community will be conducting the High Holyday Services for the thirteenth consecutive year in 2007 as per the Bene Israel liturgy.

The free services will be held at: The Village Temple, 33E 12th Street, NY NY 10003

For more information, contact, Romiel Daniel, rdaniel@ariela-alpha.com.

Local Jewish Community Aids Ugandan Rabbi-to-be

By Jonathan Shugarts, August 6, 2007, Republican-American



Gershom Sizomu traveled to the United States from a land of dirt roads, mud huts, and a history of brutal dictatorship that clouded the rolling hills of his native Uganda in fear.

But Sizomu, 38, will be a rarity when he returns to his homeland. He will be the only ordained rabbi in Uganda and will lead a small community of African Jews known as the Abayudaya who live in a small village called Mbale.

"It's a journey that's a consequence of choice, we have so many choices in the country," he said of becoming a rabbi. "You can't take the journey blindly."

The man on the path to the cloth met with roughly 50 members of the Federation-Jewish Communities of Western Connecticut at a social gathering at a private home on Sunday afternoon. Those who attended were some of the federation's most generous donors and came to hear Sizomu speak of his land.

The country is recovering from the brutal dictator, Idi Amin, who took over during a military coup and is alleged to have killed an estimated 300,000 Ugandans in the 1970s. Under Amin's dictatorship, Jews lived in fear and many converted to other religions to avoid persecution. The Abayudaya community of more than 3,000 was whittled down to only 300 during that period. Sizomu said the atmosphere of his country was filled with fear. A person who admitted to being a Jew would be executed, he said.

Rabbi Sizomu is part of the Be'chol Lashon Speakers Bureau. For information about booking speakers, contact Danielle at 415-386-2604 or Danielle@JewishResearch.org.

CURRENT NEWS

In Ethiopia, Elders Dissolve a Crisis the Traditional Way

By Orly Halpern, August 9, 2007, Christian Science Monitor



Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

As the gray-haired man of letters strode into the posh restaurant in Ethiopia's capital recently, wearing his signature long, white yemiyakora tunic and black and white cap, patrons stood up and applauded.

Professor Ephraim Isaac, a retired Ethiopian Harvard scholar who lectures around the world on religion, peace, and conflict, had just helped resolve his country's two-year political crisis using problem-solving methods as traditionally Ethiopian as his garb.

Just weeks ago, 35 opposition members were sentenced to life in prison for spurring election protests back in 2005. Despite widespread pressure from donors and human rights groups who accused Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of stifling dissent, the opposition leaders had been kept in jail for almost two years for attempting to overthrow the government.

It was a deadlock that no amount of outside pressure seemed able to loosen, and the life sentences threatened to escalate the crisis. So it was clear to Mr. Isaac that his people needed a strong dose of traditional peacemaking methods. He led a nonpartisan Ethiopian "council of elders" that quickly negotiated a deal acceptable to both sides: clemency in exchange for an admission of guilt and promise to respect the rule of law.

"In our tradition there is forgiveness and elders mediate and we do not believe in grudge and vengeance," Mr. Isaac explains. "This is a very rich culture."

The release of the leaders marks the beginning of a new chapter in Ethiopian politics, which had been in limbo since the May 2005 elections. The local media credited Ethiopia's ancient tradition of mediation in resolving the political crisis and covered the front pages of the local papers with Isaac's smiling face. "This 'home-grown' solution negotiated by elders led by Ephraim Isaac is not a common occurrence for politically tense countries such as Ethiopia," wrote the Ethiopian weekly *Fortune* in an editorial.

The resolution to the political crisis was highly important to the US, because Ethiopia is a key ally in the Bush administration's fight against terror. Ethiopian troops were sent to fight Islamists in neighboring Somalia, and US troops have reportedly used Ethiopia as a base. But US congressmen were trying to pass a bill to halt any military assistance to the country until the opposition was freed and human rights abuses were addressed.

How the crisis developed

The problems began after the 2005 elections. The opposition had gone from 12 seats to over 170 out of 547 seats in Parliament. But it refused to take them because it accused the ruling party of rigging the elections and cheating them of a bigger victory. Foreign observers, such as the European Union, also noted evidence of fraud during the vote.

Demonstrations broke out across the country in June and November of 2005. Security forces cracked down on demonstrators who they say turned violent. Nearly 200 people, mostly protesters, were killed and thousands were jailed. Many of those jailed were US-educated and highly respected internationally, including a consultant for the UN Economic Commission for Africa, a former UN Special Envoy and prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and a former chairman of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council.

Isaac immediately took upon himself the goal of mediation. His inspiration, he says, comes from the peaceful traditions of his mother's birthplace in Western Ethiopia and the Judaism of his Jewish Yemenite father. He chants long verses from the Bible and tells of mediation and forgiveness throughout Ethiopia's history of ethnic and religious conflict. He met with the jailed opposition leaders and began a traditional Ethiopian mediating process, which relies heavily on the shuttle diplomacy of respected elders.

Today that method is commonly used to resolve small fights between family members and neighbors. A grandmother or elderly neighborhood shopkeeper might be asked to arbitrate. For a crisis of this scale and import, numerous nonpartisan mediators were needed. Isaac had no problem organizing it: he is famous in Ethiopia for pioneering in the late 1950s the first organized campaign to eradicate illiteracy, which affected over 2.5 million citizens in two decades, and for being the first Ethiopian to get a PhD from Harvard. He also helped establish Harvard's African Studies department.

'Council of elders'

He quickly formed a *shimagelewoch* – or a "council of elders." It included 25 of the most prominent members of Ethiopian society, including the famed runner, Haile Gebreselassie; a woman imprisoned for seven years by the former ruling Derg; the chairman of the Ethiopian Lawyers Association; doctors; veteran journalists; former parliamentarians; and retired ambassadors. "We called it the Coalition of Elders," says Isaac, who as its leader shuttled between the jail where the opposition leaders were held and the prime minister's office.

Twenty months later in a rare event in African politics, the political opposition leaders were granted freedom and the right to return to politics by the very party that had charged them with trying to overthrow the government through violence. In exchange, the oppositionists signed an apology taking collective and individual responsibility for mistakes that led to the violence that erupted following the May 2005 electoral dispute, although a government inquiry had found the security forces to blame. "As Ethiopians we have learned the important lessons from this episode in our history," declared Capital, a weekly based in Addis Ababa. "The most obvious one is that we have returned to Ethiopia's ancient tradition of mediated solutions."

However, critics such as Al Mariam, a lawyer and professor of political science at California State University in San Bernardino, Calif., says that the traditional mediation was a government tool used to avoid applying international and human rights conventions and Ethiopian constitutional and criminal law.

"To bring out an ancient and anachronistic institution and say, 'We're going to solve it this way' is dishonest and disingenuous," says Mr. Mariam. "We think it's a smoke screen to divert attention, to deceive and hoodwink the international community, to suggest to them that there is some kind of romantic idea that there are African institutions which ... are better at solving the internal problems."

A government tool?

Mariam leads a coalition for pushing the US Congress to pass the Ethiopia Democracy and Accountability Act of 2007, which, if passed, would prevent Ethiopia from receiving aid until it releases the opposition leaders and punishes human rights abusers. Two days after the sentences of the opposition leaders, a congressional foreign relations subcommittee marked up the bill for a discussion in the full committee.

Isaac had expressed opposition to the bill in the past and was accused by Mariam of trying to lobby congressmen against it. "We have no doubt about his sincerity [to help Ethiopia]," says Mariam, "but we believe he is being used as a tool by the regime to sort of deflect international pressure." Isaac declined to comment on the issue, saying he preferred to stay out of politics.

"It's a newish phenomenon that African leaders feel pressure to reverse themselves in these egregious human rights abuses," says Jennifer Cooke, co-director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "I don't think [Prime Minister Meles freed the jailed opposition leaders] from the goodness of his heart. The Council of Elders was a response to both domestic and international pressure. It was a facesaving measure."

Still, she says, "It's a break from the past."

Opinions in Ethiopia differ, but many believe that the solution was a combination of factors. "I think there was likely pressure from America," said Kalkiden Gazaheng, a university student and part-time salesclerk in the capital. "But the mediators were the ones who convinced the sides to agree."

Iran's Jews Reject Emigration Incentives

By JTA Staff, July 13, 2007, JTA.org

Offers ranging from 5,000-30,000 British pounds, financed by a wealthy expatriate Jew with the support of the Israeli government, were turned down by Iran's Jewish leaders, the Guardian reported. Instead, the country's Jews pledged their loyalty to Iran.

Iran's Jews rejected financial incentives to leave the country.

Offers ranging from 5,000-30,000 British pounds, financed by a wealthy expatriate Jew with the support of the Israeli government, were turned down by Iran's Jewish leaders, the Guardian reported. Instead, the country's Jews pledged their loyalty to Iran.

"The identity of Iranian Jews is not tradeable for any amount of money," the Society of Iranian Jews said in a statement. "Iranian Jews are among the most ancient Iranians. Iran's Jews love their Iranian identity and their culture, so threats and this immature political enticement will not achieve their aim of wiping out the identity of Iranian Jews."

Iran's Jewish population is the largest of any country in the Middle East besides Israel.

In Ahmadinejad's Iran, Jews Still Find a Space

By Scott Peterson, August 9, 2007, Christian Science Monitor



TEHRAN, Iran

Enmity runs deep between arch-foes Iran and Israel. And that confrontation complicates the lives of Iranian Jews, who make up the largest community of Jews in the Middle East outside the Jewish state.

Iran's Jews are buffeted by inflammatory rhetoric from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about "wiping Israel off the map" and denying the Holocaust, and a politically charged environment that often equates all Jews with Israel and routinely witnesses the burning of the "enemy" flag.

But despite what appears to be a dwindling minority under constant threat of persecution, Iranian Jews say they live in relative freedom in the Islamic Republic, remain loyal to the land of their birth, and are striving to separate politics from religion.

They caution against comparing Iran's official and visceral opposition to the creation of Israel and Zionism with the regime's acceptance of Jews and Judaism itself.

"If you think Judaism and Zionism are one, it is like thinking Islam and the Taliban are the same, and they are not," says Ciamak Moresadegh, chairman of the Tehran Jewish Committee. "We have common problems with Iranian Muslims. If a war were to start, we would also be a target. When a missile lands, it does not ask if you are a Muslim or a Jew. It lands."

The continuous Jewish presence in Iran predates Islam by more than a millennium. One wave came when Jews sought to escape Assyrian king Nebuchadnezzar II around 680 BC; others were freed from slavery by Cyrus the Great with the conquest of Babylon some 140 years later.

Anti-Semitism historically 'rare'

Historically, say Jewish leaders, anti-Semitism here is rare, a fact they say is often lost on critics outside, especially in Israel, where many Iranian Jews have relatives. Still, the Jewish community has thinned by more than two-thirds since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, to some 25,000; the largest exodus took place soon after the Islamic Republic was formed, though a modest flow out continues.

"Our problem is that the Israel issue is not solved, and that affects us here," says one Iranian Jew who asked not to be named. But that does not affect every Iranian Jew. Surgeon Homayoun Mohaber measures his nationalism in blood, and bits of metal – the kind of support that Iranian Jews say has defined their small community's ties to Iran.

During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, as an Iranian military surgeon, Dr. Mohaber conducted more than 900 frontline operations, was himself wounded, and gave blood twice to save fellow Iranian soldiers. Today, in his Tehran clinic, he keeps a jar full of bullets and shrapnel fragments, extracted during the war from wounded soldiers. "The relations between Jews and Muslims, between 70 million Muslims and 30,000 Jews, are very good," says Mohaber. "In Israel, the situation for Iranian Jews is quite misunderstood."

"[The Islamic regime] made very good respect for me all the time, and did not care about my religion after the revolution," says Mohaber, who avoided a general purge of Jews from the officer ranks after Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. But some episodes have shaken those who remain. In 1999, charges of spying for Israel were brought against 13 Jews in Shiraz and Isfahan, sparking a new exodus and widespread fear.

Amid a welter of international criticism, 10 of those charged were handed sentences – later shortened – that ranged from four to 13 years in prison. Jews in Tehran at the time told the Monitor of their fears that "Zionist groups connected with the US" were hurting their cause by using the issue against Iran. Today, all 13 are free, and remain living in Iran. "The effect [of the Shiraz cases] was very bad," recalls Mohaber. "But they have rectified it. I think it was a political case between Iran and Israel."

Fine line between faith and politics

The saga underscored the delicate line Iranian Jews draw daily between their religion and politics. Outside Iran, "they think our condition is very bad, living as a minority in a religious country, with law based on Islamic law," says Mr. Moresadegh, of the Jewish Committee. He notes "some difficulties," including restrictions on government employment, but says that Mr. Ahmadinejad's questioning of the Holocaust, while very unwelcome, "has no effect on our daily life." The president's fierce anti-Zionist speeches culminated with Iran hosting a controversial Holocaust conference last December.

"It is quite clear that a bunch of Zionist racists are the problem the modern world is facing today," the president said in his Iranian New Year message on March 21. They aim "to keep the world in a state of hardship, poverty, and grudge and strengthen their rule. The great nation of Iran is opposed to this inhuman trend."

The Iranian Foreign Ministry recently facilitated a day-long visit to significant Jewish sites in Tehran for the diplomatic corps. Privately, Iranian officials said the event was designed to reassure Iranian Jews, after unease over the December conference. Jewish leaders portrayed themselves as ordinary Iranians, facing the same problems and with the same aspirations for their nation. "The Jewish community was probably one of the first [minority groups] to join in with the revolution, and in this way gave many martyrs," Maurice Motamed, holder of the one seat set aside for Jews in Iran's 290-seat parliament, told the diplomats. "And after that, during the eight years of the imposed [Iran-Iraq] war, there were many martyrs and disabled given to Iranian society."

"Every revolution is followed by some issues, problems, and restrictions [on minorities]," said Mr. Motamed. "Fortunately, all these effects have been completely removed in the last ten years."

The diplomatic tour – with a number of Foreign Affairs Ministry officials – visited a Jewish school, a home for the elderly, a community center, and one of 100 synagogues left from Iran, during Friday Sabbath prayers. "We have obviously had migration out of Iran," says Afshin Seleh, a teacher of Jewish heritage with a white yarmulke skullcap, who says he loses two to three students per year in classes of up to 30. Upon the walls of the Jewish school are portraits of revolution leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and Iran's current supreme religious leader.

"There have been different voices [coming] from the government, so people felt unsafe," says Mr. Seleh. "But our existence here has always been separate from politics in Iran, and we always had peaceful coexistence with the Muslim community." Part of that coexistence has been gratitude for the Dr. Sapir Hospital, a Jewish charity hospital that would have closed years ago, but for subsidies from Jews inside and outside Iran, doctors say.

During the 1979 revolution, the hospital refused to hand over those wounded in clashes with the security forces of the pro-West Shah Reza Pahlavi. Ayatollah Khomeini later sent a personal representative to express his thanks. Ahmadinejad, too, has made a \$27,000 donation.

Still, the Iran-Israel standoff has spilled over into many avenues of life here, with varied results for Iranian Jews. Strong anti-Zionist undercurrents developed in Iran – and across the Middle East – since Israel's creation in 1948. Those views came to a boil in Tehran after the 1967 war, when Israel crushed Arab foes and occupied the West Bank, Gaza, and Sinai. That war marked a turning point in Iranians' attitudes toward the Jewish state, and sometimes toward Iranian Jews.

During the Asian Cup final in 1968 (which Iran won, 2-1) Iranian fans wore eye patches and chanted abusive slogans, to mock the Israeli defense chief Moshe Dayan. According to published reminiscences, "some homes of Jews in Tehran were attacked and set on fire."

In a match-up between Iran and Israel in the final of the 1974 Asian Games in Tehran, protesters against Israel, members of then-shadowy Islamic groups, prepared to attack the Israeli soccer team. "Our aim and dream," recalls Ezat Shahi, identified as a "revolutionary fighter" in recently published memoirs, "was to create an event similar to the 1972 Munich Olympics, when the Israeli team was taken hostage by Palestinian gunmen from "Black September," in a standoff that left 11 Israeli athletes dead.

Security measures forced protesters to scale back those plans, but rioting broke out that night. "On that night, [the authorities] couldn't prevent people from doing what they wanted," says a witness who asked not to be named. "As soon as Israel expanded its power [in the 1967 war] and oppressed the Palestinians, even the liberal part of Iranian society started to call them Zionists." Those flames, encouraged by Islamist groups that would play a key role in the 1979 revolution, helped define the Islamic Republic's opposition to Israel – but not necessarily to Iranian Jews.

"There is always [talk] outside the country that religious minorities are under pressure," says Mr. Motamed. "It is important to say that what people say about minorities is completely wrong."

"Jews here have great Iranian roots – they love Iran," says chairman Moresadegh. "Personally, I would stay in Iran no matter what. I speak in English, I pray in Hebrew, but my thinking is Persian."

Aliyah of 600 French Jews Biggest Group Move Since '72

By Brett Kline, July 30, 2007, JTA.org



TEL AVIV (JTA) -- Descending from the plane with her parents and three siblings, the first thing that struck Leslie Elgrably at Ben Gurion Airport was the intense heat and humidity. Elgrably, 24, from the Paris suburb of Antony, was among more than 600 French citizens who immigrated to the Jewish state on July 25 in what was the largest single-day aliyah from France since 1972.

The olim came on flights from Paris and Marseilles organized by the Jewish Agency for Israel and AMI, which promotes and supports aliyah from France. "We were all exhausted but very excited," Elgrably said after an airport ceremony marked by speeches by Israeli President Shimon Peres, Jewish Agency Chairman Zeev Bielski and AMI founder Pierre Besnainou. "The

officials and the press all made a big deal about this.”

A few days later, after the hoopla had subsided, Elgrably said she had bittersweet feelings about the move. “At first I felt like I was on yet another vacation in Israel,” she said, sitting on the terrace of her uncle’s apartment in Netanya, where her family is staying for a couple of weeks until their place nearby is ready. “I was out the other night with friends in Tel Aviv, in a club right on the beach, just like on vacation. But all these boxes and suitcases stacked up in the apartment here are proof that this time we are here to stay.”

“I feel like I am in limbo. I am sad about leaving Antony, where we went to Jewish schools, ate kosher food and generally had a good life in a strong Jewish community. We experienced very little anti-Semitism there, and our decision to move to Israel was not at all about running away from France.”

In Netanya, her parents appear nervous. Her 6-year-old sister cries a lot. “We are waiting to move in to our own place,” Elgrably said. She plans to open a home-based skin care and beautician business in Netanya, the same line of business she had in France.

Jewish Agency officials say they expect more than 3,000 immigrants from France this year, the largest number since 1972, when immigrants stopped coming by ship and began arriving by plane.

Last week’s mass immigration took place the day after Tisha B’Av, which marks the destruction of the Holy Temple and the Jews’ dispersal to the Diaspora, making the aliyah religiously and historically symbolic. “Your ancestors were kicked out of the Holy Land in 70 A.D.,” AMI President Gil Taieb said over the plane’s loudspeaker system just minutes before landing. “Many went to Spain, from where they were dispersed in 1492 by the Inquisition on the same day of the [Jewish] calendar. Many went to North Africa, and eventually came to France in the early 1960s. Now you are finally returning to Israel. The circle has been closed.”

Some 85 families will live in Netanya, the coastal city north of Tel Aviv that already has the largest number of French-speaking people in Israel, almost all of Moroccan, Tunisian and Algerian origins. France is home to about 600,000 Jews, 70 percent of whom are of North African origin.

The next most popular destinations for last week’s olim are Ashdod and Jerusalem. Several other families are moving to Eilat, Israel’s resort city on the Red Sea, and Akko, on the northern coast. A few students said they would live in Tel Aviv.

Danielle Attelan, 20, arrived alone and will live at the Hebrew University’s Mount Scopus campus in Jerusalem. The Jewish Agency will pay for her three-year course of study in political science and journalism. “I didn’t want to live in Tel Aviv because it is too much like Paris,” Attelan said with a laugh. “Talk to me in a few years. I will be a journalist in Israel.”

Many of the new arrivals have close family in Israel. French Sephardim are only one or two generations away from the exodus from North Africa around 1960, precipitated by independence from France, and in many cases family members went to Israel rather than to France. Relatives maintained their family ties, and some Israeli family members of the immigrants came to the airport last week to welcome the new arrivals.

The flight from Paris included husband and wife Moise and Louise Bettan; he is 96 and she is 91. They made aliyah in their wheelchairs. “We have been dreaming of this moment since 1948,” said Moise. Both were born in Algeria; now they will live in Netanya, where one of their sons has a home. Lucid and articulate, Moise said, “I guess we are proof that it is never too late to make aliyah.”

At the airport ceremony, Peres welcomed the olim. “This is a magnificent day for all of us,” he said. “Israel is a passion-filled country, where we are still resolving our national problems. Now you are part of the process. I cannot promise you it will be easy, but you will never be bored here.”

IDENTITY

A Conversion for the Ages

By Dan Pine, July 3, 2007, j. Weekly



"We haven't done this in 500 years," announced Joseph Wahed in his elegant Egyptian accent. "We're a bit rusty." About 80 members of the 1,000-strong Karaite Jews of America (KJA) who were gathered in their Daly City synagogue laughed knowingly. Wahed was right: This was the first known Karaite conversion ceremony since 1465, when a group of Spanish Christians became Karaite Jews in a Cairo synagogue.

For the Daly City congregation and for Karaite Jews around the world, the July 31 ceremony was historic. After a year of intense study, 10 adults and four minors had come from far-flung places — the Czech Republic, Australia, Canada and the hinterlands of America — to swear fealty to Karaite Judaism.

Tracing its origins to eighth-century Persia, Karaite Judaism does not recognize the Talmud or other post-biblical rabbinic texts as authoritative. Though spread around the world, a sizeable number of Karaite Jews lived in Arab lands, especially Egypt. The sect, which numbers 35,000 adherents worldwide — most of them in Israel — has developed unique customs, from prostrate prayer to foregoing footwear in the sanctuary to observing different kashrut laws.

Mixing milk and poultry is OK. B'nai mitzvah and Havdallah are OK. Celebrating Chanukah, going to the mikvah or wrapping tefillin is not. Using any lights on Shabbat is not. Nor was accepting converts, at least not for the last 542 years.

Even other Jews were not entirely welcome. One had to be born into a Karaite family to be a Karaite Jew. But 15 years ago, the Karaite Council of Sages in Israel finally decreed a change, welcoming other Jews. And last year, the council finally accepted the notion that conversion is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. "Isaiah speaks of gentiles brought in by God," said Hakham Nehemia Gordon, looking on proudly at the converts. "This is a fulfillment for gentiles to embrace 'Kara.'"

"Kara" is a Hebrew term meaning "scripture." A Karaite is a person of the Scripture. "Hakham" is an honorific designating a person of great learning.

With the council's change of heart, non-Jews were now welcome to convert to Karaite Judaism. David Martin was one of them. In the presence of the Torah, Martin stood ramrod straight before a beit din (Jewish court) consisting of three Karaite leaders to sign conversion documents and recite the Ruthic vow: "Your people are my people, and your Elohim is my Elohim."

Dressed in his best bolo tie, Martin was joined by his wife, Lisa, and daughters, Sarah and Joanne (both of whom converted through consent of the parents and the beit din). Their family conversion to Karaite Judaism culminated a seven-year spiritual sojourn, which included explorations with the Mennonites and Messianic Jews.

"The New Testament just doesn't agree with the Old Testament," says Lisa Martin. "We said, if it doesn't add up, go with the commandments."

When the Martins go home to Silver City, N.M., they will be the only Karaite Jewish family in the Land of Enchantment. "It's daunting," said Martin. "But we decided we're keeping the commandments at home." After the Martins made it official, a few female congregants offered up a congratulatory Arab trill. Virtually all KJA members are of Egyptian extraction, and several chatted excitedly in Arabic as they watched the ceremony (the synagogue's wall of honor features plaques stamped with names like Kheder, Marzouk, Moussa and Gamil).

The Jerusalem-based Gordon is not of Arab extraction. He grew up in an Orthodox home, the son of a Chicago rabbi. After concluding that Talmud was the word of man and not another revealed Torah, he was drawn to Karaite Judaism. He helped build the movement by launching a Web site, karaite-korner.org, and drawing curious Jews and non-Jews into conversation.

"This [conversion] is something we've been working for over a long time," he said. "These people have been on a journey for the truth, and by truth I mean Karaite Judaism. They show a level of faith and conviction I wish all sons of Israel would have."

One of those sons is Yochanan Labombarbe. A native of Iowa, he now lives with his wife, Leah, and daughter, Gavriella, in

rural West Virginia. He grew up in a Christian home, but as an adult concluded the Christian Bible was “filled with fallacies. We rejected it, rejected the Christian Messiah and started on our own to keep and observe Tanach [the Hebrew Scriptures].”

He first exchanged emails with Nehemia Gordon in 1999, and joined a Web forum on Karaite Judaism. Like their fellow converts, the Labombarbes enrolled in Karaite Jewish University, an online program that teaches the tenets of the faith and helped prepare students for conversion. “I’ve had this desire to become Jewish since I first contacted the Karaites and realized there were Jewish people who keep Tanach alone,” he said. “It’s really awe-inspiring to think HaShem has opened up this door to allow people to join the Karaite Judaism at this time.”

KJA is not just the largest Karaite congregation in the Bay Area, it’s the only one in America. Because of their small numbers and different practices, some of which are at odds with other Jewish denominations, the sect has faced a measure of disdain from fellow Jews. But Gordon is quick to mention that Karaites have a long proud history with the Jewish people. More than 30,000 Karaite Jews live in Israel today, many in the Ashdod area. Most came from Egypt and Syria following the 1956 and 1967 wars. They are fully recognized as Jews by the state of Israel, serve in the Israeli military and are integrated into Israeli life, with at least 11 synagogues around the country. “The oldest synagogue in Jerusalem is the [12th century] Karaite synagogue in the Old City,” Gordon noted. “The first known Bible commentaries are Karaite commentaries, and the early Masoretes [Torah scribes and scholars] were Karaites. We like to say Moses was the first Karaite.”

Though not quite a modern day Moses, convert Chad Walker, 24, does hope to lead his family to the Promised Land one day. Walker lives in Muddy Pond, a small town in Tennessee’s Cumberland Mountains. He’s used to sitting on the porch harmlessly firing his shotgun in any direction. Walker and his seven siblings were home-schooled and raised with strict fundamentalist Christian principles. But somewhere along the line, the family began to doubt the Christian creed. The family “flipped” from church to church, eventually realizing “we couldn’t use the New Testament any longer. The Old Testament took precedence. We dumped Christianity and took fellowship with nobody. Someone told us we might be Jews.” That led Walker to Gordon and Karaite Judaism. He is the first in the family to convert, but he believes his parents and siblings may not be far behind. He also intends to make aliyah as soon as the Israeli theo-bureaucracy works out the details. Meanwhile, it was Walker’s night to shine. He, too, took the vow and accepted his new Tanach and tzitzit as he became “a child of Israel.” After a day of fasting, he and his fellow converts said the blessings over wine and challah, their first meal as Jews.

“For a community accustomed to losing members, this will reverse the trend,” said a beaming Rabbi Joe Pessah, who helped preside over the conversion ceremony. “Karaites had built around themselves a Great Wall of China. We may differ [with other Jews], but we are one people. Choosing to be a Jew is the most brave statement we can make.”

Pessah was one of the founders of Karaite Judaism of America. The native Egyptian left his homeland after years of persecution, including three years in an Egyptian jail simply for being Jewish. Once released, he fled first to France and then, with help from the Jewish Agency, to America. Because a steady stream of Karaites from Egypt had settled in the Bay Area, the region became a growing magnet for other immigrants.

Today, the Peninsula and Daly City area is home to the largest Karaite community outside of Israel.

Once all 14 had been formally converted, the congregation broke out in ululations and song. Then, four of the newly Jewish couples exchanged wedding vows, having this chance to be married again in a Jewish setting. Rav Moshe Firrouz, an Israeli Karaite Jew, chanted benedictions with musical trope that would not sound out of place in a Cairo shouk. A festive Middle Eastern kosher meal followed, with the new Karaite Jews congratulated over and over. One of them, Hadar Nichol, is a native of Montreal and now lives in a French-speaking community in Cornwall, Ontario. She will be the only Jew in her town, but not for long. Her goal: to make aliyah as soon as possible.

Raised Protestant, her initial encounter with Judaism had an almost other-worldly quality to it. In 1999, she noticed that her French-speaking neighbor was throwing out a perfectly good ham radio because “it only picked up English-language stations.” She took it home and, while turning the dial, came upon a Jewish cantors’ convention. For the first time, she heard Jewish liturgical melodies and the Hebrew name of God. “It blew my mind,” recalled Nichol. That led to further research, and once she came across Gordon’s Web site, she was hooked. “[Karaite Judaism] is what I understood Scripture to mean,” she said. She, too, committed to the Karaite Jewish community, even though she was unable to convert for many years and her only shots at fellowship came online.

The Daly City event marked the first time she ever came face to face with other Karaite Jews. Currently completing her studies to become a holistic healer, Nichol hopes to move to Israel as soon as she can. And not only because the weather is warmer there than in eastern Ontario. It’s because she wants to bring more Jews into the Karaite fold. She says she understands “Israeli suffering as consequences of disobedience of Torah. There are tons of secular Karaites. If we don’t turn back, what more will happen?” Because of complex laws governing conversion and the Jewish right of return, it’s not clear when the new Karaite Jews can make aliyah. But even if it takes years, that won’t stop them from visiting Israel in the meantime. “We try to get together as often as we can and travel to Israel,” said Labombarbe. “We want to come out [to Daly City] yearly or more

often if we can. We'll continue our learning and progress.

Living in rural West Virginia, the Labombarbe family has reached out to other Jews in the region, including a Reform Jewish community in nearby Martinsburg. They hope to take classes and brush up their Hebrew, and they haven't ruled out moving to nearby Washington, D.C., to be further connected to the Jewish world. But they know that, for the time being, they are the extent of the Karaite Jewish community in their neck of the woods.

As the celebration went on into the evening, it was hard not to notice the unusual collision of cultures: French and Arabic-speaking Egyptian Jews rubbing shoulders with one-time Pentecostals and Baptists from Appalachia.

Still, space, time and language seemed to mean little to them. Tonight, they were all brothers and sisters. After evening prayers, the congregation called it a night. The next day, all of the converts headed home, their short visit to California over. Gordon is confident he'll be hearing from all of them soon as they resume their online community. It's not the same as being together in person, but maybe next year. In Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, said Gordon, the Karaite Jews of Israel hope to establish a seminary in the months ahead, and "we have a bunch of people lined up for the next conversion class."

Our Hindu Widows

By Rob Eshman, August 10, 2008, JewishJournal.com



I know too many beautiful, brilliant single Jewish women in their 30s and 40s.

I hear too many stories about the lack of available Jewish men, the first dates who are too lost or too pathetic, the fights over marriage and children that end the relationship and send the woman, now a bit older, diving back into the ever more shallow pool.

But I don't blame these women, of course not. I blame rabbis. That's right.

They see the same lonely, sensational women I do: a slim, passionate Hollywood executive pushing 40 who simply, desperately, still seeks the elusive nice Jewish guy. A brilliant doctor with a runner's body who, at 44, still can't find "the one." A writer who asks me to keep my eye out for any Israelis new to town, because she figures she's dated most of the native Jews. A marketing executive who has given up on finding the right Jewish man: "If it happens, it happens."

I ask her if she still wants children, and she says, "More than anything." And tears come to her eyes.

I talked with four of these women over the space of three days last week, all wondering if I had come across any single Jewish men. I mentioned a name. Here's what happened: They had already dated the guy. I mentioned another name. Already dated him, too: At 41, he was not quite ready to settle down. A straight, eligible Jewish man in his 40s gets around this town faster than the weekend box office numbers.

Yes, this is a problem for non-Jewish women, as well, but if your requirements for potential dates includes "must be Jewish," you suddenly rule out 94 percent of potential males. There aren't enough marriageable Jewish men out there. Period. It's a game of musical chairs, and someone is going to get left out.

So these women go to their rabbis, and the rabbis wring their hands and commiserate. They also give sermons about the evils of intermarriage, about the scourge of assimilation. They might, taking a proactive approach, arrange some speed dating or singles mixer program at their shul.

Does any of this work?

Well, it hasn't for the women I know. We all know women like them, and the numbers bear it out: Later marriage means lower

fertility, and outside of the Orthodox world, Jewish birthrates are plummeting.

"In a community that has long-since ceased to replace its natural losses, continued low fertility rates mean that the number of children in the communal pipeline will soon drop sharply," Jewish Theological Seminary Provost Jack Wertheimer wrote in a well-known 2005 Commentary essay, "causing a decline over the next decade in enrollments in Jewish schools and other institutions for the young."

Wertheimer's proffered solution was for liberal Jewry to promulgate the lessons and values of Orthodoxy, which, of course, result in far less intermarriage. Get women out of schools and workplaces and into marriage beds sooner, said Wertheimer. Reinforce the taboo against interdating and intermarriage.

"In the face of today's secular norms," Wertheimer wrote, "the Orthodox call on an additional source of strength: the power of Jewish norms and obligations."

Wertheimer's heartfelt attempt at a solution might help a bit, but it is more wishful than wise. It also fails to address the more pressing human tragedy behind these numbers: datelessness, loneliness and childlessness for the women we know and love.

A more practical and immediate answer lies just outside these women's doorstep: interdating.

There, I said it.

By clinging to the taboo against interdating, we have created a class of women only somewhat less bereft and miserable than the Hindu women once doomed to celibacy and isolation after becoming widows. What kind of tribe condones this? Why are single women the only class of people punished for keeping faith with Jewish peoplehood? When I asked one of these women if she would consider dating non-Jews, her answer was visceral.

"I can't believe you're suggesting that!" she said. "So much of what's important to me is Jewish: My values, my philanthropy, my activities."

But if her rabbi encouraged her to find the right man, regardless of his religion, then opened his or her arms to that man with programs, classes and encouragement -- wouldn't that increase the odds of happiness all around?

I ran the idea by Rabbi Elliot Dorff, rector of the American Jewish University and an authority on Jewish law.

"It's very complicated," Dorff said, "It is cruel to say to a woman in her 40s better you should remain unmarried than date a non-Jew," Dorff said. "On the other hand, how do you say to people in their 20s only look for Jews, but then tell people in their 30s and 40s, if you haven't found any, maybe you should date non-Jews?"

On the other hand, Dorff said, there are many rules we apply to younger people that we change or adjust as we age.

Clearly this is an idea the Conservative and Reform movements need to revisit, now.

The irony is that the women for whom Jewish identity is the strongest may have the least chance of passing that identity on. Our taboos have consigned them to be exiles among exiles, outcasts among outcasts. Like the Hindu widows in the movie, "Water," they pay a terrible price for an inflexible idea.

Our rabbis and community leaders need to spend less time hand-wringing and more time devising the words, teachings and institutional structures that allow Jewish women of a certain age to freely seek life partners among non-Jews, then draw those non-Jews toward the richness and beauty of Jewish life -- before or during marriage.

Yes, marrying Jewish is the ideal. Dating Jewish is the ideal. But what our inability to find creative solutions gets us is a massive group of single women who are facing their 40s childless. We have numerous opportunities to argue statistics and write essays for Commentary -- they have one shot at childbearing.

Intriguing Pathways Across Time

By Mike Marqusee, March 2, 2006, The Hindu

Genealogy offers insights into the shifting ties between people and places. It's a study in ironies and contrasts, not a monument to a coherent or definitive inheritance.

The Internet has helped fuel a genealogy boom. Websites serving the legions of amateur family historians are popular and profitable. As more archives are digitised and more data goes online, the field of research opens wide, a territory criss-crossed with intriguing, unexplored pathways. Half an hour on the web can turn up a link that in former times could only have been unearthed through months or even years spent amidst dusty tomes.

Fascinating field

Genealogy has long exercised a particular fascination for North Americans. In a society that envisions its own birth and identity as a radical breach with the Old World, there's a hunger for ancestry, and an industry that caters to it, with specialist services for Irish-, Scottish-, Indian-, African-Americans and others.

Since the U.S. is not only an immigrant but also a geographically mobile society, Americans without upper class pedigrees can find it hard to trace family history back beyond their grandparents. So in search of their forebears they search through census, draft board and social security records, passenger ship lists and local business directories. In my own family's case, another useful source has been the FBI, whose (heavily censored) files are available to the public under the Freedom of Information Act.

Thanks to the FBI, I know that in 1943 my maternal grandfather was described by a confidential informant as "super-sensitive on the Semitic question and always on a Jewish crusade". This informant advised that hiring him "in any capacity ... would be a detriment to the Government and the war effort". I also know that in 1951, a citizen felt public spirited enough to inform J. Edgar Hoover that my father had "spoken favourably of the Soviet system" in a launderette in Ithaca, New York.

European origins

I've got forebears who emigrated from Germany in the wake of the failed democratic revolutions of 1848. And from Poland and Lithuania with the great wave of Eastern European Jewry from 1881 to the eve of the First World War. Plus a lone non-Jew, an Irishman from Cork.

Thanks to a 19th century ancestor I share with a genealogist in Mecklenburg, Germany, I know that I am descended from (among many anonymous others) Yahi'a Ibn Ya'ish, the first Chief Rabbi of Portugal, who was born in Moorish Cordova in the 12th century. I know that one of Yahi'a's descendants fled the Inquisition and established himself as a coin-maker in northeast Germany in the early 17th century. And I know that among the descendants of the coin-maker, those who remained in Germany in 1940 were annihilated by the Nazis. In the database of Yad Vashem, the holocaust memorial and institute, I can identify scores of names with whom I might have a connection.

Genealogy can be a wonderful introduction to the joys of research as well as a tool for democratising the study of history. But much depends on what people are looking for when they embark on the journey.

Some hope to aggrandise their lineage, to establish a personal link with famous or exceptional human beings. Some want proof of their ethnic authenticity. Oprah Winfrey paid a great deal of money to be told that her DNA showed that she was of Zulu heritage. The problem here is that Oprah's forebears were enslaved in west Africa many years before the formation of the Zulu nation several thousand miles away in south Africa. A few years ago Indian Jews queued to have their DNA tested and their link with Judaism confirmed. But what is actually demonstrated by this test is merely that the person has a genetic strand in common with people who lived in ancient Palestine; its presence does not make one a Jew nor does its absence make one a non-Jew.

A social science

Genetics is not genealogy. Genealogy, if it isn't to descend into obscurantism, is a social science. Not least because the genealogical chain depends on the testimony of generations of mothers, at least one or more of whom are bound to have been less than frank about the actual parentage of an heir. What's more, the noteworthy ancestor is likely to be radically unrepresentative. The poor leave behind far fewer recorded traces. In rural areas family memory is sustained through oral tradition, but where a great break has occurred — from rural to urban, from Europe, Africa or India to the western hemisphere — that tradition is often lost. So conscientious family historians must study the ebbs and flows of the broader social groups to which their ancestors belonged, not just hunt out named individuals.

Above all, family historians must distinguish between conjecture and established fact. The temptation to claim a link because it is attractive, because it elevates the researcher's sense of self, has to be resisted. In other words, family history has to be good

history — both rigorous and imaginative. For me, genealogy offers insights into the shifting ties between people and places. It's a study in ironies and contrasts, not a monument to a coherent or definitive inheritance. My great-grandmother who left Lithuania for the U.S. in 1888 was a divorcee fleeing the tyranny of the Rabbis as much as the pressure of anti-Semitism. She was one of five of my great grandparents who were Yiddish speakers and whose generation enriched the vocabulary of global English. If you've ever heard the word chutzpah, it's because of them.

COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

African Hebrews Proud of Community's First Officer

By Anat Bereshkovsky, July 5, 2007, YNetNews.com



First member of Dimona's African Hebrew Israelites completes officer training course. 'This is a big step for us,' community leader says

Itay Ben Yisrael of the African Hebrew Israelites community in Dimona is the first member of the group to become an officer in the IDF. Some 120 young community members currently serve in the army, after the IDF began promoting their enlistment several years ago.

Itay said that the move from life in Dimona to military life was "a culture shock" for him. "I was stunned by how the other guys talked, the curses, the foul language, the direct approach to everything. They could ask me the most intimate questions, as if we grew up together in the same room.

"On the other hand, in the army I discovered the value of friendship. The guys with whom I trained are today my best friends," he added.

The community's leader, Ben Ami Yisrael, told Ynet, "Itay could become a symbol for all of us here in Israel. This is a big step for us. From now on, no one will doubt our willingness to serve in the Israeli army. Itay is certainly a pioneer, our first officer, and we're proud of him."

Itay was born in Dimona and grew up at his grandmother's house, after his parents divorced. Group members said that because he was "overly kind" he was initially dismissed from the officer training course, but due to his insistence was accepted to the following course, which he completed successfully.

"I was explained that a commander has to be mean and tough, and this was sometimes hard for me, but now I'm okay with it," he said.

Panama's Jews, Arabs Coexist

By Brian Harris, July 22, 2007, JTA



COLON FREE ZONE, Panama (JTA) -- While conflicts in the Middle East make the prospect of peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs seem distant, a walk along the crowded streets of this trading zone shows Jews and Arabs can get along.

Inside the stores here -- wholesale distribution centers for Asian goods seeking Latin American importers -- businesses run by Orthodox Jews and Arab Muslims operate side by side with nary a hint of conflict. In some cases, businesses are co-owned by Jews and Arabs. "We all came to Panama to work and for reasons of prosperity, but we are all allowed to work and no one interferes," said Allan Baiten, a second-generation Jew and a consultant to businesses here. "Once upon a time we were all brothers, and we continue to be."

Unlike other parts of the world where devoutly practicing Jews and Muslims have come into conflict, in Panama the two are

almost symbiotic. Saturday nights find Panamanian Jews enjoying meals at Arab-run restaurants with halal-certified food. Nightclubs are packed with young Jews and Arabs more concerned about partying the night away than the faith of their fellow partygoers. Here at the free zone, a stone's throw from the Caribbean near the northern mouth of the U.S.-built Panama Canal, that spirit spills into the high-stress world of business. The free zone continues to be a linchpin in Latin American commerce, but the era of free trade and Internet purchasing has put the squeeze on business owners who now compete not only for customers but also for goods, prices and logistics. An increasing amount of business is done on consignment.

That, merchants here say, has led to increased stress levels but also a greater sense of kinship among merchants, no matter their religion. All agree that one key to that kinship is avoiding the issue of conflict in the Middle East. Panama's Jews are known for their support of Zionism while its Arab community is known for displaying support for the Palestinian cause. "You don't touch on that issue," said Mordejai Burstein, sales manager at the fabric firm Tex Tela, a midsized company nestled among appliance distributors here. "So long as that issue is not touched, there are no problems."

Geography also plays a role in the good relations. Nearly all of the 9,000 Jews in Panama live in Panama City, on the Pacific Ocean, while the estimated 10,000 Muslims are concentrated mainly in Colon, on the Caribbean, and in the western provincial city of David, near the Costa Rican border. The mosques in Panama tend to follow moderate strains of Islam.

As Baiten noted, many of the Jews and most of the Arabs trace their roots back to present-day Syria, a geographical coincidence that helps unite the two groups in this predominately Catholic country. But for all the excuses that could serve to dismiss the social harmony as a product of circumstance, there is an underlying desire to get along, says Ezra "Sury" Hafeitz, the owner of the Panama City fabric store Bazar Pico-Pico and a leader in the local B'nai B'rith chapter.

"There is a code of respect here to not interfere or make religious comments," Hafeitz said. "Here we respect one's religion and do not seek out conflict." The good relations have found themselves strained at times, especially after a 1994 bombing of a commuter flight that killed 10 Jews, an unsolved bombing blamed by some on Hezbollah and by others on Colombian drug cartels. But tensions eased when most Arabs joined the rest of the country in condemning the attack.

With three Jewish congregations -- two Orthodox and one Reform -- and thousands of kosher and Sabbath-observant Jews, Panama stands out in Latin America as having one of the most devout and practicing Jewish populations. Muslims are as practicing as their Jewish counterparts here; synagogues and mosques are under construction to attend to the ever-growing flocks.

The respect between Panamanian Jews and Muslims is mutual. The country's grand rabbi and the local imams say they speak on the phone, and local Jews say they have never felt victimized by Muslims. "They want to maintain a good level of friendship and respect, above all, between the two communities," Baiten said of the Muslims. Panama, he said, "is a showcase of tolerance."

Jewish Family Reclaims Egyptian Hotel

By Alain Navarro, June 24, 2007, AFP



It took exactly half a century for the Metzger family to reclaim ownership of the Cecil Hotel, the illustrious palace overlooking Egypt's Mediterranean and immortalized in Lawrence Durrell's classic, "The Alexandria Quartet".

"I can't believe it, after all these years of lost hope," said Patricia Metzger, the British daughter-in-law to Albert Metzger who owned the Cecil and was kicked out of Egypt in 1957 "with only two suitcases."

Albert Metzger came from a Jewish family in Alsace-Lorraine in eastern France. Born in Egypt, he was given one week by authorities to leave the hotel that his father founded in 1929. Fleeing westward toward Libya, he reached Malta then Italy before finally settling in England. All efforts to come back to his native Egypt were in vain. Tens of thousands of the country's foreign and Jewish elites fled Egypt where the hostile mood following the creation of Israel made them suspect or at least unwelcome.

Looking toward the Mediterranean Sea, the Cecil palace, which once attracted Alexandria's rich cosmopolitan elite, was

nationalized by late president Gamal Abdel Nasser after Egypt's nationalist revolution in 1952. It is now an 86-room four-star hotel run by French company Accor. After marathon negotiations, an agreement was signed between the Egyptian government and the heirs to the once glistening palace, which in its heyday hosted the likes of Britain's wartime leader Winston Churchill, British writer Lawrence Durrell, and the infamous Al Capone.

Patricia and her son John, 40, who now live in Tanzania, signed the deal with Egypt's tourism holding company Hotac, returning to the family the hotel that they have now sold back to Egypt for an undisclosed amount. "A page has been turned, a terribly moving one," said Patricia. "Justice has finally won, but it took too long," said the elderly lady, who celebrated her engagement at the palace in 1956 before her forced exile.

After his expulsion, Albert began a new life with his family in Tanzania. In Dar Es-Salaam, he bought the New Africa hotel, which itself was nationalized after the independence of the East African country in 1964. "My grandfather was a real adventurer, a man of great strength who cashed in before dying in 1971," said John Metzger, a Canadian citizen. After Albert's death, Patricia and her two children spent the "nightmare" of 1970s in the courts trying to reclaim ownership of the Cecil. In 1996, a court ruled in their favor, but the ruling was never carried out.

The Egyptian government had quietly opposed the deal, for fear of creating a precedent. The official "owner," the Egyptian state-owned Egoth hotel chain, claimed that it had spent \$4.5 million to turn Cecil into a luxury hotel. A source close to the negotiations said that Egoth had been dragging its feet over a settlement with the Metzgers who demanded \$10 million for the palace, minus money spent on so-called renovations.

While its Moorish-style facade was barely altered, the interior hallways and the terrace suffered under renovations by the Egyptian state. Gone was the mirror where Justine, Durrell's heroine in the Alexandria Quartet, used to see her reflection. The immense patio bordered by an interior gallery was destroyed making for a skimpy entrance hall.

Alexandria's jet-setters crossed paths at the Cecil, whose walls were witness to lavish parties and intimate rendezvous. It is there that the British General Bernard Montgomery, who beat Italian and German troops in the key World War II battle of El Alamein in 1942, was billeted.

"We were terrified, General [Erwin] Rommel was only 110 kilometers [68 miles] away, and every night I would go to the Cecil bar in search of news," remembers Max Salama, 92, the head of Alexandria's tiny Jewish community, referring to the German field marshal nicknamed the "Desert Fox."

Of the 30,000 Jews who lived in the northern Egyptian city before the mass expulsion, only some 20 remain, including two men - eight short of the number required to form a prayer assembly. "My father was a tailor to Nasser, that is why we managed to stay," said Ben Gaon, who sat in the vast and empty synagogue on Alexandria's Nebi Daniel Street.

During their short visit to Egypt, Patricia and John Metzger spent their first night at the Cecil and managed to recover a few of Albert's personal items: a watch, a pair of boots, and some volumes of an Encyclopedia Britannica. "It's a relief for us, and the beginning of a new era for the hotel," said Magdy Al Badry, the hotel director. Renovations are planned "in the spirit of Cecil's bygone era."

ARTS & CULTURE

The Messenger Journeys to Dimona, Israel

By Amy Green, May 15, 2007, BoxingScene.com



Anthony "The Messenger" Thompson has prepared for his June 9 fight with Yuri Foreman with time in the gym, sparring, running the miles, punishing the body, thinking with a fighter's mind to focus on his undefeated opponent. Thompson also had two weeks in Floyd Mayweather's training camp for Oscar De La Hoya, valuable time in which he gained knowledge and skill from the pound for pound king.

"I thank Team Mayweather." Thompson said. "When my granddaddy taught me "wisdom is power," he never lied. Floyd Mayweather touched me more by talking to me that he did with his hands. And what he told me was "we don't get tired. Black people got a lot of talent but we ain't never in condition. And that's all I had to hear. When I came back I've been training like a monster ever since."

Pushing himself physically, and also mentally, getting his mind around facing his undefeated opponent. For Thompson, boxing is made up of three, even four components: physical, mental, spiritual and emotional. Now he's going the extra mile to face Foreman. Several thousand miles to Dimona, Israel, the land of his heritage for spiritual and emotional training that will further define his career.

Anthony Thompson and Yuri Foreman appear similar on paper. Both young, tall, orthodox fighters, well ranked in the competitive middleweight division. Foreman undefeated, (22-0); Thompson (23-1) with a single loss and a higher knockout ratio. Foreman is a Russian Jew and Thompson is a Hebrew Israelite, which is probably of little consequence to the casual fight fan, but a point Thompson feels strongly should be clarified. Many people confuse Thompson for being Jewish.

The difference between the two is an issue Thompson labors mightily to correct.

When asked the difference between Jewish and Hebrew Israelites, Thompson illustrated his point:

"It's more of a religious standpoint. You can convert to being a Jew. A Hebrew, what people don't understand, is the Hebrew Israelites; the twelve tribe of Hebrews was a nation of people. Like your ethnic background, like your nationality. If I asked you what's your nationality. I can't call myself black. I've never seen a black man a day in my life. They say that we're African because we come from Africa. But that's not true. It's not where you're born that makes you who you are. It's the lineage of people that you come from. That's like Oscar going back to Puerto Rico and Mexico and things of that nature, because that's where he came from. But not only does he come from Mexico, his ethnicities of people are Mexican. I'm not a African."

"I'll give you an example. If a Korean man moved to Puerto Rico and have a son there, does that make his son Puerto Rican? No, it doesn't make his son Puerto Rican. It's gonna make his son still Korean because his father's Korean. So- the difference between Judaism is you can convert. You can't convert to a nationality. I can't convert into being a Korean. You can convert into being Islam, you can convert to being a Christian but you can not convert to being a Hebrew Israelite because that's nation of people. It's not a religion."

"There's no such thing as "Jew". The word Jew doesn't even exist. In the English language it exists, but me being knowledgeable unto what I know, and what I'm into, the word Jew doesn't exist. There is no such thing as a Jew. The word Jew is a root word, which means "Judah". Judah was one, one of the twelve tribes. And anybody that was from the land of Judea was called a Jew. But there is no such thing as Jew. That's like the word Jewish means to be like a Jew. It doesn't mean you are. "

Thompson's tribal heritage is traceable from the two tribes that were separated from the original twelve, and fled to the western part of Africa. The Africans then sold the Hebrew Israelites into captivity. There was no war- they were never conquered. The Hebrew Israelites were purchased as slaves in exchange for frankincense, myrrh, gold and gunpowder.

"Which is how we actually got over to America, Thompson said. "It's a lot of history and why I get so much recognition about being a Hebrew Israelite because they know I know what I'm talking about. I'm not gonna argue and say Yuri Foreman is not a Jew. I'm not even gonna get into that. All I'm gonna do is stake my claim. I'm going back. It's one thing to say something, it's one thing to read about it, then it's another thing to go there. And I'm going back to stake my claim. I have people - family members in Dimona in Israel that have been established there for the last forty years."

The claims Thompson is staking are both emotional and spiritual on this pilgrimage. He said his purpose is "go back, see my people, get the spiritual connection, have my nation and ethnic people be behind me, support me, because this is just as big, bigger than a physical war. It's a war that is untold, the people are not really gonna speak about- him being Jewish and me being Hebrew. I'm definitely gonna need the spiritualism. I will praise my Creator in a land we all read about, the place of biblical and historical moments. I want to see the land King David walked upon, go in the Jordan River, go by the Red Sea Moses parted. Have a chance to see all this I once read about."

Team Thompson will be hosted by spiritual leader Ben Ammi who has welcomed such celebrities as Stevie Wonder into his fold. During the week in Dimona, Thompson's focus will be to "train me on the inside. I got a tremendous team with my brother Tyonn, Nasi Yabok and my sparring partners Demetrius Hopkins and Rasheem Brown, and this is the best camp Team Thompson has ever had, but I'm gonna go away for one week to get myself together. Eat right, sleep right, pray, and ask for forgiveness for all my sins I've committed against my Creator. Dwell amongst my people for a week." When I come back, that next Sunday, starting back Monday it will be back to hard work."

Thompson acknowledges Oscar De La Hoya has the support of a huge fan base in Mexico and Puerto Rico, and that he represents his people well. Thompson seeks to bring this kind of pride to his people each time he steps into the ring. A victory over Yuri Foreman will further instill pride in his race and bring them closer to being recognized.

Thompson has prepared for Foreman with everything he possesses- body, mind, heart and soul. He considers this to be the biggest fight in his career, and knows Foreman will be in for the fight of his life.

"I refuse to get tired, or I refuse to let Yuri Foreman out point me. He's gonna have to hurt me come June 9. I'm bringing everything I got- EVERYTHING. And all I got to say to Yuri Foreman is "shalom and good luck. 'Cause I'm comin'."

Bratz: Jewish Man's Answer to Barbie

By Lisa Keys, August 7, 2007, JTA



Depending on whom you ask, Bratz are odd-looking multiethnic dolls with big eyes and skimpy clothes -- or they're, like, the coolest things ever.

The dolls -- with their "passion for fashion" demonstrated through midriff-baring tops and micro-mini skirts -- have been criticized by many parents as being overly-sexualized and therefore bad examples for little girls.

But ask a 6- to 10-year-old girl about them, and she'll say they're sooooo awesome. The sales of Bratz nearly rival that of Barbie -- topping more than \$2 billion by 2006 -- and now, with the wide release last week of the first-ever Bratz feature-length film, they've secured their place as pop-culture icons for the pre-tween set.

Bratz were created in 2000 by Isaac Larian, an Iranian Jewish immigrant-turned-toy entrepreneur, who had set out to create an anti-Barbie. Legend has it that Larian was turned off by the swollen-head prototype a designer showed him, but his then-11-year-old daughter, Jasmin, was enthralled by it.

Thus, the first of the Bratz pack, Yasmin, was born. Soon afterward, her totally multicultural BFF (that's best friends forever!) followed, including Jade, Cloe and Sasha -- all of whom are characters in the live-action film.

Unlike Barbie -- with her WASP-y blonde hair, penchant for pink and lame steady boyfriend, Ken -- Bratz represents a different type of feminine ideal. They reflect the mixed messages that are fed to young girls today -- a "Girl Power!" mantra combined with a tarty, sexed-up image a la Britney Spears. With ethnicities ranging from Asian to African American to a unique blend of Jewish-Latina, the dolls trumpet their message loud and clear: It's okay to be yourself -- as long as you look totally hot when the boys are around.

Perhaps it is no accident that this new, aspirational doll had a Jewish creator. After all, back in 1959, Mattel co-founder Ruth Handler -- the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants -- created Barbie.

Back then, "assimilation" was not the dirty word it is today; it was a goal. As such, Handler -- a savvy businesswoman who convinced her husband to turn his Lucite and plexiglass furniture-making hobby into a lucrative business -- created the ultimate American fantasy: the leggy, buxom blonde who remade herself as the notion of the ideal American woman changed with the times, from stay-at-home mom to the uber careerwoman who does it all and still looks good.

Still, despite Mattel's attempts to diversify the line, Barbie has had trouble keeping up with the times. Larian's dolls speak to the girls of the 21st century, a time when the melting pot has given way to the multi-ingredient salad bowl, when multi-ethnic stars like Jessica Alba rule the box office and a hybrid like Chrismukkah is practically a national holiday.

That Larian -- a Sephardic Jew who arrived in the United States at age 17 with \$750 in his pocket -- is this new arbiter of kiddie cool also reflects the normalization of Jewish culture in American society at large where, today, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach has a national television show, bagels can be bought coast-to-coast and Yiddishisms like "oy vey!" are a part of everyday American dialogue.

But somehow muddled up in the Bratz phenomenon is the notion that image is everything. And many don't approve of the tarted-up image they see.

In her latest book, "Girls Gone Mild: Young Women Reclaim Self-Respect and Find It's Not Bad to Be Good," author Wendy Shalit takes Bratz to task for its overtly sexy image.

Decrying the come-hither fashions of Bratz Babyz -- a spin-off of the original Bratz line -- and the emphasis on looking "hot" in the Bratz books, Shalit argues: "If a little girl is young enough to be coloring and wearing glitter stickers, then she's probably still too young to be worrying about boys and looking hot."

"I think it's a very confusing time and Bratz is reflecting this confusion," Shalit told JTA. To really get at the root of the problem, she said, "we need to address the whole 'If you've got it, flaunt it' philosophy, which many mothers continue to believe in."

Even Sean McNamara, the director of the Bratz film, saw the challenges in transforming pint-sized plastic hoochie-mamas into wholesome, real-life teenage girls.

McNamara, the executive producer of teen TV hit "That's So Raven," was unfamiliar with Bratz when he was approached to direct the project, so he took a trip to his local toy store. "I was blown away," he told the Los Angeles Times. "There were two full walls of Bratz stuff. But when I saw them, I thought, 'These aren't cute dolls -- they look like sluts.' "

"Bratz," the movie -- while keeping its stars clothed and chaste -- bends over backward to hit home its message of diversity, often resorting to cliché.

Half-white, half-Asian Jade, for example, is a science geek who, under pressure from her parents to be a good little girl, totally rebels by secretly wearing the hottest fashions. Then there's half-Jewish, half-Latina Yasmin -- played by 25-year-old Nathalia Ramos, herself the daughter of a Spanish father and a Australian Jewish mother -- who inexplicably has a mariachi band in her kitchen and sings "La Cucaracha" with her grandmother (played by Lainie Kazan), whom she inexplicably calls Bubbe.

The movie centers around the four Bratz as they enter high school, totally sworn to be, BFF. Soon, however, thanks to the devious Meredith Baxter Dimly -- the Queen Bee who is not only the school president, but the daughter of the principal -- they are forced into cliques that tear them apart.

With Meredith employing the divide-and-conquer thing, Sasha soon hangs only with the cheerleaders, Cloe is a jock and Yasmin, the loner, gets saddled with the label of "journalist." (As if!)

Two years later, thanks to a massive food fight and an all-important talent show, the girls are brought back together. Without giving away too much of the plot -- which borrows liberally from far better teen movies -- the Bratz, with their awesome performance and their totally hip style, break down the barriers at Carry Nation High.

But with all the "likes," the "omigods," and the rampant commercialism -- after all, a love of makeup and shopping are what bind these girls together -- what kind of message is Bratz sending to young girls?

Isaac Larian, traveling in Africa at press time, was unavailable to comment. Back in 2005, however, he told Business Week magazine, "Kids don't want to play with Barbies anymore."

One has to wonder: Is that necessarily a good thing?

Jokes My Father Never Taught Me: Life, Love and Loss with Richard Pryor

Book Excerpt: By Rain Pryor, November 2006, Regan Books



Chapter One: Home at Last

It was one of those rare Los Angeles days when the ocean fog lifts early and the smog never appears. The baby blue sky sparkles, calm and cloudless, and you can see the sharp outlines of the houses clinging to the Hollywood Hills.

The year was 1973 — I was four years old — and my mother and I were in her battered Volvo, winding our way toward those hillside houses. I had no idea where we were going, and my mother wasn't talking.

"Are you going to tell me now?" I said.

"Stop bugging me," she said.

"I just want to know where we're going," I said.

My mother took a deep breath, gave me a dirty look, and exploded: "We're going to meet your father, okay?! Happy now? We're going to meet your motherf**king father."

That was a lot to process for a four-year-old. The language didn't bother me — I was used to it — but I was having trouble getting my mind around the fact that my father lived only a few miles from our own apartment. "My father lives here?" I asked. "In the same city?"

"Where the f**k did you think he lived? On the motherf**king moon?"

Frankly, that was a possibility. I had heard many stories about my father — most of them pretty unflattering — and I never imagined that some day I would become part of his life. He was a famous comedian, after all, and I'd been given to understand that comedy took precedence over fatherhood. What's more, he happened to be a self-destructive, self-absorbed schmuck, and he wasn't even remotely interested in me. That's what my mother told me, anyway — that and worse. Whenever she talked about him, and she talked about him often, she would work herself into such a frenzy that she would turn red in the face. Her parents, my Jewish grandparents, also talked about him. They didn't curse with quite as much vigor, and they didn't turn red in the face, but they made no secret of their feelings for the crazy Black Prince who had ruined their daughter's life (and, in many ways, their own).

"I'm going to meet my father?" I asked.

"Didn't I just say that?"

"He lives in one of these nice houses?"

"That's right. The son of a bitch lives in a f**king palace, and we live in a dump in the wrong part of Beverly Hills."

"Why is it the wrong part of Beverly Hills?"

"Would you give me a goddamn break already?!"

I didn't understand what she was so upset about. Earlier that afternoon, when we were in the house, preparing to leave, my mother had seemed excited, if a little nervous. She said we were going "somewhere special," and told me to wash up and put on a nice dress and to try to look pretty. When I returned, fully dressed and looking awfully pretty (if I may say so myself), she was still in her jeans, topless, tearing through her closet for just the right thing to wear. I guess she wanted to look pretty, too, but nothing made her happy. I watched her try on one blouse after another, growing increasingly frustrated, until there was a veritable kaleidoscope of blouses piled on the bed. She had practically emptied the closet by this time, so she went back to the bed and sifted through the discards, hoping she had missed something. She tried the purple dashiki again, then the severe black knit sweater with the bell sleeves, but neither of those worked. Finally, she opted for my very favorite: a yellow and red Mexican peasant blouse with embroidered flowers. She buttoned it up, tied up her hair with a red silk scarf, and turned to look at herself in the mirror.

"Motherf**ker!" she said.

"What did you say, Mommy?"

"Nothing," she snapped. "Let's go."

We went out into the street and moved toward her old, sad looking Volvo. She opened the rear door and motioned with her head. "Get in," she said. I did as I was told, and as she strapped me into the backseat, I noticed that her hands were shaking. I wanted to ask her if something was wrong, but she didn't seem like she was in the mood for questions, and I didn't want to make her mad. I hated it when she got mad, and she got mad often. She shut my door, hard, then climbed behind the wheel, started the car, and pulled out into the street.

We rode in silence for a while, each of us alone with our thoughts. The Volvo chugged across Robertson Boulevard, took a right

on Sunset, then a sharp left into the winding hills. When she finally told me that we were going to visit my father, I was more confused than ever. I couldn't believe that my father actually lived in Los Angeles, way up in those lovely hills, just a few miles from our shabby little duplex. I couldn't understand why we had never visited, or, conversely, why he'd never come to see me.

"Did he just move here?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He's always been here."

"Do I look like him?"

"Stop with the f**king questions already!"

I looked out the window again. The houses were unlike any houses I'd ever seen — big rambling places nestled into canyons, only vaguely visible behind trees and walls and tall gates.

The Volvo kept climbing, negotiating one hairpin turn after another, and after what seemed an eternity we reached a gate at the top of the hill. We'd only gone a few miles, but I felt as if I were embarking on a very long voyage, indeed. Mom got out and rang the bell and a Hispanic man appeared a moment later. He opened the gate and waved us through. We made our way up the steep driveway and came to a gravel parking lot that was overflowing with shiny new cars.

Mom got out and I didn't wait for her to come and get me. I unbuckled my seatbelt, opened the door, and stepped out onto the gravel. I was standing near the edge of the property, next to a steep drop. I felt a little dizzy from the ride, and the view of the neighboring canyons was so overwhelmingly magnificent that I found myself holding my breath.

My mother walked around the front of the car and took my hand.

"My head feels twirly," I said.

"Yeah," she said. "Mine, too. The air's thinner up here."

"What does that mean?"

"Never mind," she said. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I already goddamn told you," she said. "You're going to meet your father."

She led me toward the house and through the front door, which was wide open, and once again she seemed a little nervous. Still, she walked inside like she owned the place, and I followed.

It was quite a place. The walls were hung with gorgeous African paintings and African fabrics, and there were wooden statues, primitive sculptures, and ancient masks in every nook and cranny. The floors were carpeted with zebra skins and tiger rugs, and the sofas were low to the ground and covered with textured pillows. The place felt open and inviting, and clearly everything had been chosen with great care, but there was something a little tacky about the opulence. I didn't know it then, of course, but in some ways my father had re-created the warehouses of his youth.

"What are you gawking at?" my mother snapped.

"Nothin'. All this pretty stuff."

"Oh yeah," she said, oozing sarcasm. "The man is proud of his Dark Continent roots, but he's about as black as Bill Cosby."

The house was oddly empty, but we heard voices outside, along with the sound of laughter, and we followed them out to the pool. There was a party in full swing. My mother hesitated for a moment, took a deep breath, then marched onward with false self-confidence. A woman in a lounge chair saw us and watched us approach. She was wearing a skimpy bikini, a then-fashionable Twiggy haircut, and smoking a cigarette. She took a long drag and studied us appraisingly until we reached her side. "Well, well, well," she said, smiling. "You must be Shelley and Rain. Richard is expecting you. I'm Maxine. It's wonderful to meet you." She turned her attention to me. "You're cute as a button," she said. "I have a daughter, Elizabeth. I'm sure you're going to like each other. You want to meet her?"

"I guess so," I said.

"You probably want to meet your daddy first, though," she said, then turned and pointed at a skinny man, sitting on an outdoor divan, surrounded by half a dozen people. He was gesturing with both hands, his motions large and fluid. "You see that handsome man right over there?" Maxine said. "The one holding court? Well, that's your daddy."

I looked at him, then up at my mother. She was staring at Richard, and I didn't see much love in her eyes.

"Go on," Maxine said. "He's waiting to meet you. Been talking about it all day."

My mother took me by the hand and we approached, and I could see she was really nervous all of a sudden. That made me a little nervous, too, but as we drew closer my nervousness was replaced by astonishment. Looking at that man was like looking into a mirror. We had the same face — lean, with a sharp, long jawline — and the same dark, penetrating eyes. We even had the same long-fingered hands.

Suddenly, he noticed us. He stopped talking and rested his hands on his knees. "Well, sh*t," he said. "Can it be? Can it really be?"

I looked up at my mother, towering above me, blond and blue-eyed, then back at my father. His hair was a mass of thick, tight curls, and it seemed to glisten in the afternoon light. It looked a little like a halo, and suddenly I felt happy and confident. That was my daddy. I was home at last, back in the Enchanted Castle, where I belonged.

"Hello, Richard," my mother said with icy detachment.

"Hello, Shelley," he said, but he didn't look at her. He was looking straight at me, only at me — his little princess. "Well, sh*t," he said. "Ain't you somethin'?" He turned and addressed his entourage. "She looks just like me, doesn't she? Ain't denying this one's mine!"

Everyone laughed.

"Hey, people," he said, raising his voice and addressing the entire party. "This is another one of my kids, Rain. Say hi, baby. Now don't be shy, girl — you're a Pryor. Pryors are lots of things, but shy ain't one of them."

I was terrified, but I squeaked out a weak hello.

"Man, you're even prettier than me!" he said. Everyone laughed again, right on cue, and when the laughter died down he motioned for me to come closer. I was a little scared of him, but I was also fascinated, so I went. "Are you really my daddy?" I asked in a small voice.

"Hell yeah!" he said, laughing. "I'm your daddy, all right. Now come on over here and give yo' daddy some sugar. Don't be afraid, baby. I made you."

He reached for me, and suddenly I was in his lap. He kissed my cheek and laughed his big laugh. "Man, ain't you a wonder?! Ain't this girl a wonder? Little Rain Pryor! A regular little look-alike princess! What do you say, people? This is my very own sweet-ass little girl. Ain't she something?!"

He held me tight and kissed me again and I felt like crying, but I'd have been crying with happiness. I was home. I was sitting on my daddy's lap. I had a daddy, just like other little girls, and he was real and he was nice and he was kind to me and he smelled awful good.

Little Rain was home at last.

