

## Be'chol Lashon Update October 2006

[October 2006 PDF](#)

### UPCOMING EVENTS

#### **SAN FRANCISCO**

- The Asian American Jewish Experience
- Shooting Water, Jews in India

#### **PHILADELPHIA**

- Screening of "The Journey of Vaan Nguyen"

### CURRENT NEWS

- JIMENA Pushes for Rights in Congress
- Hispanic Jews to Combat Anti-Semitism in Media
- Venezuela's Jews Fear Anti-Semitism

### IDENTITY

- Los Judios Nuevos: The Plight of the Anusim
- Krauthammer's Law: Everyone is Jewish Until Proven Otherwise
- A Mother Adopts, and Discovers Her Own Racism

### JEWISH COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

- Spanish Kids Learn Jewish Heritage by Baking Matzah – in September
- In China, a Growing Interest in All Things Jewish
- Israel Will Soon Welcome From India Descendants of a "Lost" Jewish Tribe

### PRESERVING JEWISH HERITAGE

- Panama: New Life Along the Canal
- In Egypt, Remnant Carries on Rich Fabric of Jewish Tradition
- The Last Three Jews of Qamishli

### ARTS & CULTURE

- Vietnamese Israeli family takes a long trip 'home'
- One Rapper Who Can't Seem to Blend In
- From Bollywood to the Sands of Jerusalem

---

### UPCOMING EVENTS & COMMUNITY UPDATE

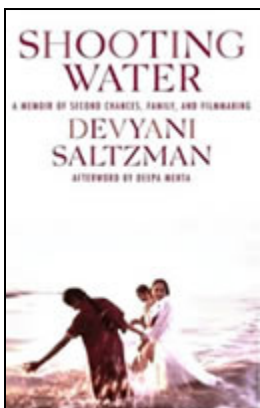
#### **SAN FRANCISCO**

Be'chol Lashon is pleased to co-sponsor two programs with the Bureau of Jewish Education Jewish Community Library, for the Jews in Asia/Asian Jews Exhibit and Lecture Series.



**Asian American Jews:  
The Asian American Jewish Experience  
Panel Moderated by Dafna Wu**

**Bureau of Jewish Education, Jewish Community Library  
1835 Ellis Street, San Francisco  
November 28  
7:30pm**



**Jews in India:  
Shooting Water: A Memoir of Second Chances, Family and Filmmaking  
by Devyani Saltzman**

**Bureau of Jewish Education, Jewish Community Library  
1835 Ellis Street, San Francisco  
December 13  
7:30pm**

Check out <http://www.bjesf.org/events.htm> for more information and other events featured as part of the exhibit.

---

## PHILADELPHIA

### FROM VIETNAM TO ISRAEL, and then...

Screening of  
"THE JOURNEY OF VAAN NGUYEN"  
with Discussion & Refreshments

**Monday, October 30, 3:30-6 pm**

#### Temple University

Annenberg Hall 3 (on Liacouras Walk  
or 13th St. above Norris St., enter & go down one floor)

84 MIN. Film + Comments, Questions & Answers with the filmmaker Duki Dror & Vietnam expert Dr. Dieu Nguyen

**Cosponsors:** Asian studies program; Jewish studies program, Institute for Race and Social Thought, Film and Media Arts Department, Center for Vietnamese Philosophy, Culture, and Society, International Programs, Consulate General of Israel

**For more information about the film, read the article "Vietnamese Israeli family takes a long trip 'home'" in the Arts & Culture Section.**

## CURRENT NEWS

### JIMENA Pushes for Rights in Congress

By Staff Writer, August 18 2006, j. Weekly

Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa (JIMENA) has embarked on a campaign to get the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries discussed in Washington whenever Palestinian refugees are mentioned.

The resolution, H. Res. 848/S. Res. 494, already has significant support in the House, and JIMENA is asking rabbis to mention it in their High Holy Day sermons.

The resolution has been assigned to the International Relations Committee in the House and to the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate, where it is pending.

JIMENA hopes to record the communal and personal losses of the almost 1 million Jews who lived in the Middle East and North Africa before time erases the memories of these communities and their culture. In addition, the organization is looking for people whose families are from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Iran.

---

## Hispanic Jews to Combat Anti-Semitism in Media

By Tal Abbady, September 24 2006, South Florida Sun-Sentinel



Not everyone is laughing at the high jinks of Spanish-language morning radio.

Hispanic Jews offended by a Jewish caricature in a top-rated Miami radio show known for its raucous, politically incorrect humor formed the Hispanic Jewish Initiative, which held its first meeting this month and will meet monthly in Miami.

The group, created under the state chapter of the Anti-Defamation League, will monitor Spanish-language media for anti-Semitism and address other concerns of Florida's growing, Spanish-speaking Jewish population. Those who form part of the effort say the challenge lies in re-educating immigrants who hail from countries where ethnic humor goes unchallenged.

"What was acceptable in our countries of origin may not feel the same here. Just because people don't understand the language doesn't mean you can get away with it," said Yael Hershfield, associate director of the Florida Region of the Anti-Defamation League, whose headquarters are in Boca Raton. Hershfield, from Venezuela, organized the initiative, which so far has 15 participants.

Members of the group say mainstream Jewish groups have overlooked Hispanic Jews in the effort to root out prejudice. They say most non-Hispanic Jews are unaware of the stereotypes on Spanish-language radio, a staple of news and entertainment for many Hispanics. "The Jewish community in the U.S. has always monitored English-language media," said Clara Amsel, of Miami, a member of the newly formed initiative. "But Hispanic Jews have been less organized in that regard. Now our voice will be heard."

Earlier this year, some Hispanic Jewish listeners complained to the Anti-Defamation League about the acid ravings of the immigrant-hating Goldstein, a Jewish character on the popular show *El Vacilon de la Manana*, or *The Morning High Jinks* on *El Zol 95.7 FM*.

Often drawing its high-octane political satire from current events, the show, produced by second-generation Cuban-Americans Enrique Santos and Joe Ferrero, also mocks Cubans, blacks, Catholics and other groups. A Web page linked to the show ([enriqueyjoe.com](http://enriqueyjoe.com)) depicts a black character, Al Jackson, with the manipulated mug shot of a man whose lips balloon from his face. In place of a photo for Goldstein is a Nazi eagle and swastika. The page was on the Web as recently as Saturday, but it was unclear whether any active links can lead Web surfers to it from the show's home or other pages.

Hispanic Jewish Initiative co-chairs Jaime Einstein and Roland J. Behar said they contacted the station's owner, Spanish Broadcasting System Inc., with their complaints. Officials with the Spanish Broadcasting System and the show's producers could be not reached for comment, despite several attempts.

Einstein, 59, a Cuban-American attorney who refers to himself as a "Jewban," arrived in the United States as part of the Pedro Pan exodus. The Hollywood resident says ADL's Hispanic committee has a hard road ahead. "There's an enormous need for bridge-building between Hispanics and Jews. You have a lot of Hispanics bringing attitudes from their countries that can be traced back to pre-Vatican II Catholicism," he said.

The Second Vatican Council, held from 1962 to 1965, repudiated long-held Church attitudes against Jews. But the reconciliation between Jews and Catholics is often not reflected in Spanish media outlets, particularly radio, Einstein said. "Those of us who consume English-language media take for granted that people try to be politically correct in their expression," he said.

The Hispanic Jewish Initiative will be more than a media watch. It plans to send volunteers into churches, schools and community centers with an anti-bias message and establish ongoing ties with non-Jewish Hispanic organizations.

An Anti-Defamation League survey released in 2005 showed that 29 percent of Hispanics held anti-Semitic beliefs, as opposed to 14 percent of the general population. The survey asked subjects a series of questions about their perceptions of Jews.

The recent arrival of Jews from Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina and other countries has bolstered South Florida's Hispanic Jewish community, which for decades was primarily Cuban.

There are roughly 15,000 Hispanic Jewish adults in Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties, according to University of Miami demographer Ira Sheskin. The numbers do not include children or recent waves of immigrants from South America who've settled in Broward County.

In their own countries, Behar argues, Hispanic Jewish immigrants were afraid to speak up against anti-Semitic slurs on television and radio. "They're coming from countries where they were an isolated minority," said Behar, 55, a Cuban-born mortgage broker who lives in Miami. "When they heard themselves insulted on the radio, they were quiet about it."

---

## Venezuela's Jews Fear Anti-Semitism

By Vinod Sreeharsha, Aug 20, 2006, JTA

Rebecca, a 44-year-old Jew born and raised here, says she and her husband "increasingly talk about whether we should stay in Venezuela." While her cousin and aunt have spent the past month in a bomb shelter in Haifa, Rebecca, who refuses to give her last name because her family does some work with the Venezuelan government, says she also feels "increasingly fearful" -- not because of war but simply for being Jewish in Venezuela.

This is largely because of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's vehement criticism of Israel during its monthlong war with Hezbollah. Chavez has described Israel's actions in Lebanon as a "new Holocaust," and said that "Israel is doing what Hitler did to the Jews." Chavez's supporters have followed his lead: Graffiti featuring swastikas and slogans such as "Judios asesinos" -- or "Jewish assassins" -- is on the rise. Many Jews here think Chavez's heated rhetoric is fanning the flames of anti-Semitism -- an ongoing theme during the Chavez administration, they say.

At a recent demonstration, protesters burned an Israeli flag outside the Israeli Embassy in "a campaign orchestrated by the government," according to Paulina Gambus, who in 1970 founded the human-rights office in the Confederation of Israelite Associations of Venezuela, known by its Spanish acronym CAIV. In addition, the capital's largest synagogue, Tiferet Israel, has been vandalized in recent months with slogans including "Judios Afuera," or "Jews out." Gambus and others contend that the recent anti-Semitic behavior isn't typical for Venezuela. Gambus' parents, a Syrian Jew and a Greek Jew, arrived here in 1929; she was born in 1937. Attending public school, Gambus -- along with the children of Communist parents -- was able to opt out of a daily Catholic studies class. "There was never a stigma" for doing so, she says.

In terms of religious tolerance, she says, she "never felt rejection" in Venezuela. Gambus won election to the Caracas City Council, the national legislature -- where she served for 16 years -- and the national senate in 1999, never hiding her Judaism. Unlike Argentina or Chile, Venezuela has no history of providing refuge for Nazi fugitives or excluding Jewish immigration. Daniel Benaim, 46, a Caracas native and leading television producer, says he has "never needed to downplay his faith" in his career. But he's increasingly concerned about the government's incendiary comments about Israel and Jews.

Beyond the rhetoric, Chavez is pursuing closer strategic relations with Arab countries and Iran, and is emerging as a key supporter of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who repeatedly has called for Israel's destruction. Analysts say it's not unusual for Venezuela and Iran, two founding members of OPEC, to maintain friendly relations. But Carlos Romero, a political scientist at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, says that "since the foundation of Israel, Venezuela has maintained equilibrium between its interests in Israel and Arab countries. Chavez has broken this."

"This is very dangerous," Romero added. "Chavez is going into a black tunnel." The Venezuelan Jewish community acknowledges that Israeli foreign policy sometimes warrants criticism.

"I didn't agree with what happened" in Lebanon, Benaim says. But he and others say Chavez and his supporters have crossed the line that separates healthy criticism from hateful speech and potential incitement to violence -- and examples predate the Lebanon war.

For example, Venezuelan filmmaker Jonathan Jakubowicz appeared last January on the popular "La Hojilla" program on state-run television. The pro-Chavez show often assesses international and local private media coverage of Venezuela. The hosts criticized Jakubowicz's film, "Sequestro Express," as unfair toward the government. But they went on to identify Jakubowicz as a Jew and claim that Miramax Studios financed the film only because the studio was run by two Jews.

In addition, Norberto Ceresole, an Argentine who was a key adviser to Chavez, has blamed the 1994 AMIA terrorist attack in Buenos Aires, which killed 86 people and wounded more than 300, on a Jewish conspiracy. In fact, evidence points to the involvement of Hezbollah and Iran.

Sergio Widder, the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Latin American representative, told JTA recently that the center found on the Internet a group known as "Hezbollah Venezuela," which calls for "Jihad in Latin America." To be sure, the Venezuelan Jewish community is not unanimously convinced that it faces an increasing threat.

Natan Quiaro, 30, has worked for Chavez since 1998, currently as an assessor in the Education Ministry. He feels a strong connection to Israel, where his father lived for 10 years, and he has attended Caracas' Tiferet Israel synagogue since he was 8 years old. Quiaro says he never has experienced discrimination or anti-Semitism from colleagues in government, even now. He thinks Chavez's criticism of Israel has been appropriate -- but admits his opinion isn't shared by most of the Jewish community.

Quiaro questions whether domestic politics have influenced the community's fear. Members of the community mostly are middle- or upper-middle class, a socioeconomic group that includes few supporters of Chavez, a populist who purports to be the voice of the poor. Quiaro contends that the Venezuelan Jewish community is "selective" in its criticism of those who invoke Hitler: For example, when U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld earlier this year compared Chavez to Hitler, CAIV issued no denunciation.

Chavez supporters also point out that Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, along with pro-Chavez legislators, attended an event organized by the Jewish community last year commemorating the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

Chavez met with CAIV earlier in the year over a Christmas eve speech that the Wiesenthal Center deemed anti-Semitic. CAIV later told the Forward that Chavez was not an anti-Semite, and accused the Wiesenthal Center of interfering in Venezuela's affairs. However, several Venezuelan Jews told JTA that CAIV's statements were made without consulting the community. Since then, they contend, Chavez and his supporters' true sentiments have become abundantly clear.

## IDENTITY

### Los Judios Nuevos: The Plight of the Anusim

By Juan Mejia, April 10 2006, Presentense Magazine



Antonino spent his childhood in rural Puerto Rico. In the backrooms of stores and in the patios of private houses, he took his first steps in his life-long study of the Torah. There, amidst tools and seeds, he heard—in whispers—his introduction to the Jewish faith. Antonino's teacher, a mild mannered store owner, was one of the many benei anusim\* who belonged to an underground web of Torah educators dotting the Puerto Rican landscape and who taught the tradition in the only way they had known for over four centuries: in secret. At that time neither Antonino nor his teacher could suspect that they could learn the Torah in the open; that the Inquisition—which had dogged them, as anusim, for many centuries—was dead, and that they had prevailed.

Manuel grew up in Cuba practicing in secret what his grandparents called brujería ("witchcraft"). When he and his family settled in the United States, his father was surprised to discover that brujería was not only practiced in this new land but also practiced openly. Manuel and his family soon joined a Jewish congregation where they practiced their ancestral traditions, freely and consciously as Jews.

Eduardo, a Jewish traveling salesman in Colombia, once found shelter from a raging storm in a rustic rural inn. The innkeeper told him that the inn was full for the night, but "because of his race" he would be allowed to stay with his companion—another Jew—in the living room. Eduardo and his companion had not revealed to the innkeeper that they were Jewish and, with no slight apprehension, they started to get ready for the night. The feeling of uneasiness was only made worse by the only condition imposed by the innkeeper on the weary travelers: that they refrain from touching any of the valuable relics in the room. As they were preparing to go to sleep, Eduardo noticed a familiar looking bag on the mantelpiece. Written on the bag, in faded colors, was the word "tefilin." When they questioned the innkeeper, she volunteered that these were her grandfather's and that they were holy objects, never to be touched or taken out of the house.

My own grandfather remembered very vividly how twice a day the men in the family, wealthy land-owners in northwestern Colombia, would "put towels on their heads and read from strange books that they never showed to anyone." He would later confirm his suspicions that the family was not just peculiar but also Jewish.

These stories are only a sample of the vast trove of oral traditions in several regions of Latin America that attest to the Jewish origins of some of its inhabitants. I have collected them throughout my years of sharing with other descendants of the anusim and investigating their history. Paradoxically, given I am speaking of the legacy of the Secret Jews of Spain, these stories and many like them are not a secret in Latin America. The fact that the anusim played an important role in the conquest and colonization of Latin America is a well-documented historical fact. From the translator of Columbus' first expedition, Luis de Torres, to some of the conquistadores, Pedro de Heredia and Pedrarias Dávila, the anusim played an important role in the European settlement of Latin America.

The theories that diminish the relevance of this influence by claiming that only people with certified purity of blood were allowed to "pass to the Indies" ignore the rampant corruption of the Spanish Imperial bureaucracy. Moreover, they pay no attention to the brutal and incontrovertible fact that the Inquisition established three tribunals in the New World. These courts judged, tried, and executed local anusim by the score for practicing Judaism.

These anusim conquistadores and pioneers have been studied by historians and genealogists; their exploits have been novelized by native poets and also by foreign ones. The romantic idea of a Jew facing the dangerous wonders of the New World confronted, on one hand, by the perils of the jungle and, on the other, by the fires of the Inquisition is one that is particularly appealing to the imagination of the local Jewish communities who see in this Hebrew conquistador a sign of its antiquity and pedigree. These early anusim are seen as the predecessors of the Jewish communities of Latin America, even though the current communities are descendants of people who arrived at the earliest, two hundred years ago.

The high esteem in which these anusim of the past are held by these communities contrasts sharply with the difficulties faced by their descendants when they decide to reclaim their Jewish identity and heritage. Every year, a substantial number of benei anusim Latin America approach the local Jewish communities, looking for answers to the questions that pulse through the historical labyrinth of their blood. Some are looking for acceptance; a bolder few know from the outset that they want to rejoin the Jewish people through conversion. Most, though, are only interested in learning more about Judaism and, thereby, about themselves. These wishes are met, in most cases, with the sound of the synagogue's heavy doors slamming in their faces. Most of the returning beneianusim face skepticism, fierce interrogation and, finally, in most of the cases, rejection. Wary of a half-millennium voyage from the fires of Spain, across an ocean and through the jungles, and absent any other choice, some of these people abandon their quest to find out more about their identities. Some are lured by the open doors of Evangelical congregations posing as synagogues. Only a handful finds the means to persevere in their quest. throughout

The arguments used to reject these returning benei anusim run the gamut from the pragmatic to the racist. The established Jewish communities fear that, in the always unstable political environment of Latin America, these new additions will become a liability; either because they do not possess the material wealth of the Jewish community or because they fear that accepting converts would be seen as an act of aggression towards the Gentile community. The established Jewish communities fear that this return is just a passing fad and that these people are inventing their Jewish identities. The established Jewish communities fear that these newcomers will upset the religious balance and corrupt, so to speak, the doctrinal purity of their congregations. The communities fear that benei anusim are pretenders, using their conversion as a ticket to a better life in Israel. The communities fear many things. Some of these arguments I have heard to my face and some I have heard behind my back.

The panorama for the benei anusim, thus, looks very bleak. The communities in their countries are paralyzed by fear and dare not help to correct the historical mistake of the destruction of Jewish life in Spain. Aside from some journals in Israel and America and the tenacious efforts of some individuals who fund institutes and studies on the subject, there is very little academic interest in contemporary anusim issues. In contrast, the topic of the anusim of the past fills journals and occupies historians of the stature of Cecil Roth. Even Israel, which has rescued communities as the Benei Menashe and the Ethiopian Jews, helping them return to their people, seems to disbelieve the credentials of the benei anusim. There has been very little done by the State of Israel for the improvement of the condition of the benei anusim. Furthermore, the efforts by the Israeli institutions interested in bringing the benei anusim back to their roots are still in their infancy. The distance of Israel from Latin America makes these efforts even more difficult, especially when the conduits to Israel run through the same communities who are afraid to receive these newcomers.

Indeed, it would seem that the heroic efforts of the anusim of the past in transmitting Judaism to their sons and daughters is about to fail, not because of their weakness or that of their descendants, but because of the apathy and suspicion of the descendants of their long-lost cousins.

What can be done? My impression is that the benei anusim's brightest hope lies with their American brethren. American Jews, with their strong democratic identity and their geographical closeness to the concentrations of benei anusim in Latin America, seem to be the natural choice to take a position of leadership in helping the benei anusim. In the past few years, I have spoken about this topic throughout the country, and have always been warmly received—a striking contrast to the gaping silence that this topic causes in Latin American communities. American Jews in this era of apathy and voluntarism seem to be inspired by these Jews who kept their identities against all odds for more than half a millennium. The only thing that the benei anusim demand in return for this inspiration is a serious commitment to their education. This means not only creating institutions for the education of the anusim but also investigating academically the phenomenon of the anusim. The academic neglect of the topic is one of the

first hurdles in the greater project of reconnecting the benei anusim with their Jewish identity; the more we know about this phenomenon, the better we can identify the members of our community and understand our particular problems. Only the American Jewish community can overcome the problem we face; the recognition of the benei anusim by the institutions of American Jewry—secular and religious—will help to open those doors that remain closed in Israel and in our communities of origin.

The efforts of American Jews for Soviet Jewry of decades ago and the current Israel advocacy convince me that this is not a task that is beyond the capability or the generosity of the American community. After all, 351 years ago, among the trailblazing Jews that arrived in New Amsterdam from Recife were no lack of anusim who had seen in the West their new light and hope. Today, the historical descendants of these Jews can help keep this dream alive.

\*The anusim (Hebrew, "forced") were the Jews who converted to Christianity in Spain and Portugal prior to the corresponding expulsions from these countries in the fifteenth and sixteenth century and who secretly continued to practice Judaism and to identify as Jews. Throughout this article I will use the term anusim instead of the more well-known but pejorative Marranos. I will use the term benei anusim to denote their descendants in the Iberian Peninsula and elsewhere who have kept this ancient tradition alive to this day.

---

## **Krauthammer's Law: Everyone is Jewish Until Proven Otherwise**

**By Charles Krauthammer, Sept 25 2006, Jewish World Review**



Strange doings in Virginia. George Allen, former governor, one-term senator, son of a famous football coach and in the midst of a heated battle for reelection, has just been outed as a Jew. An odd turn of events, given that his having Jewish origins has nothing to do with anything in the campaign and that Allen himself was oblivious to the fact until his 83-year-old mother revealed to him last month the secret she had kept concealed for 60 years.

Apart from its political irrelevance, it seems improbable in the extreme that the cowboy-boots-wearing football scion of Southern manner and speech should turn out to be, at least by origins, a son of Israel. For Allen, as he quipped to me, it's the explanation for a lifelong affinity for Hebrew National hot dogs. For me, it is the ultimate confirmation of something I have been regaling friends with for 20 years and now, for the advancement of social science, feel compelled to publish.

Krauthammer's Law: Everyone is Jewish until proven otherwise. I've had a fairly good run with this one. First, it turns out that John Kerry — windsurfing, French-speaking, Beacon Hill aristocrat — had two Jewish grandparents. Then Hillary Clinton — methodical Methodist — unearths a Jewish stepgrandfather in time for her run as New York senator.

A less jaunty case was that of Madeleine Albright, three of whose Czech grandparents had perished in the Holocaust and who most improbably contended that she had no idea they were Jewish. To which we can add the leading French presidential contender (Nicolas Sarkozy), a former supreme allied commander of NATO (Wesley Clark) and Russia's leading anti-Semite (Vladimir Zhirinovskiy). One must have a sense of humor about these things. Even Fidel Castro claims he is from a family of Marranos.

For all its tongue-in-cheek irony, Krauthammer's Law works because when I say "everyone," I don't mean everyone you know personally. Depending on the history and ethnicity of your neighborhood and social circles, there may be no one you know who is Jewish. But if "everyone" means anyone that you've heard of in public life, the law works for two reasons. Ever since the Jews were allowed out of the ghetto and into European society at the dawning of the Enlightenment, they have peopled the arts and sciences, politics, and history in astonishing disproportion to their numbers.

There are 13 million Jews in the world, one-fifth of 1 percent of the world's population. Yet 20 percent of Nobel Prize winners are Jewish, a staggering hundredfold surplus of renown and genius. This is similarly true for a myriad of other "everyones" — the household names in music, literature, mathematics, physics, finance, industry, design, comedy, film and, as the doors opened, even politics.

But it is not just Jewish excellence at work here. There is a dark side to these past centuries of Jewish emancipation and achievement — an unrelenting history of persecution. The result is the other more somber and poignant reason for the Jewishness of public figures being discovered late and with surprise: concealment.

Look at the Albright case. Her distinguished father was Jewish, if tenuously so, until the Nazi invasion. He fled Czechoslovakia and, shortly thereafter, converted. Over the centuries, suffering — most especially, the Holocaust — has proved too much for

many Jews. Many survivors simply resigned their commission.

For some, the break was defiant and theological: A G-d who could permit the Holocaust — ineffable be His reasons — had so breached the Covenant that it was now forfeit. They were bound no longer to Him or His faith.

For others, the considerations were far more secular. Why subject one's children to the fear and suffering, the stigmatization and marginalization, the prospect of being hunted until death that being Jewish had brought to an entire civilization in Europe? In fact, that was precisely the reason Etty Lumbruso, Allen's mother, concealed her identity. Brought up as a Jew in French Tunisia during World War II, she saw her father, Felix, imprisoned in a concentration camp. Coming to America was her one great chance to leave that forever behind, for her and for her future children. She married George Allen Sr., apparently never telling her husband's family, her own children or anyone else of her Jewishness.

Such was Etty's choice. Multiply the story in its thousand variations and you have Kerry and Clinton, Albright and Allen, a world of people with a whispered past.

Allen's mother tried desperately to bury it forever. In response to published rumors, she finally confessed the truth to him, adding heartbreakingly, "Now you don't love me anymore" — and then swore him to secrecy.

---

## A Mother Adopts, and Discovers Her Own Racism

By Lisa Lerner, Aug 21 2006, ColorLines Magazine



When I was trying to decide who and from where to adopt, I had a lot of questions about transracial adoptions, and most people responded to my curiosity with a subtle discomfort. I felt embarrassed voicing possible concerns to my liberal friends, because all of us were adamant that race made no difference to our choice of friends, lovers, or tiny babies up for adoption. But in looking around at these friends, they all seemed a pretty tribal bunch: when it came time to make a family, in nearly every case, like colors had stuck together.

The first photo I received of Vaishali showed her with fair skin. I was surprised, because from what my adoption agency told me, the child assigned to me would be much darker. After I got over that surprise, I had another: I felt relief. Suddenly -- guiltily -- it was a comfort to know that she would not look so different from me, and even more important, that her light skin would save her from a lifetime of prejudice.

But ah, the magic of flashbulbs. A few months later I received several more photos and gaped at them in shock. The baby was much, much darker. Worried that the child to whom I had grown unbelievably attached had been given to some other family, I sent a bewildered email to my adoption agency in Maine which then made a bewildered phone call to their trusted social worker in India, who assured us that she had seen the child on many occasions and all the photos were of the same girl. Phew, I thought, as long as this little girl is the same one I have held in my heart for three months, she is my daughter and I am going to bring her home.

I flew to Bombay and became a mother. For the first week, my new daughter Vaishali clung to me, terrified, and I sacrificed eating, sleeping and bathing in the service of comforting her. Over and over, I told her: Mama is here. You are my baby.

Back home, after a couple weeks had passed, I stared at Vaishali's naked bottom -- her darkest part -- and tried to ignore the insistent whispers of fear. Instead of brimming with pride, I felt like a trespasser, performing ablutions on this private flesh with color so foreign from my own. It was one thing to swoon over her photographs for months, but now she was in my home; she was my family. How could this be my daughter? I looked at her and tried to find similarities between us, relieved that her hair was straight, her lips not too full. Just thinking these thoughts made me feel horribly ashamed. I tried to sort emotion from fact: was it the dark color of her skin that was making me uncomfortable, or just that she did not look like me? I ached to talk to someone about it, but I was too afraid people would disapprove, would doubt my ability to be a loving mother.

Worse, what if (since I had only been awarded guardianship and the adoption would not be final for another six months) some Indian official found out how I was feeling and took her back?

Finally, I got up the nerve to confide in a friend who has two biological children, both white, as well as an adopted Indian toddler with skin the same shade as Vaishali's. "After a while," she said, "you don't really see what your children look like. But every so often it's like returning to your home after a long vacation, and you can see it again for the very first time." Surprisingly, she

confessed that one day she'd realized how dark her adopted daughter is and started comparing her to others: Is she lighter than that Black man mowing his lawn? Darker than that Indian woman at the mall? Once she'd said it aloud, I admitted that I had done the same thing, and it had shocked me. I adored this little girl, and every single day my heart pounded stronger with love. What was I so worried about?

I thought hard. What had I done, taking this helpless child from her native land halfway across the world? I chose to adopt from India because I felt a familial pull toward its people and its culture (there is actually a community of Indian Jews!), and because I learned that the babies were usually healthy and birthed by poor, unwed village girls who were not prone to ingesting any unhealthy substances. I wanted to give an infant girl all the human rights she deserved and every possible opportunity to find gladness at being alive. I wanted to make a family with a child who had none; I wanted her to feel wanted. But had I simply upset the balance of the world?

Very soon, my daughter will have a lot to process. She's adopted, she's the child of a single mother, she's an Indian Jew by conversion. We spent the summer with my father in upstate New York, and she was nearly always the darkest child in music class, gymnastics and day care. In New York City, even Blacks and Indians in Vaishali's and my social circle are lighter than she. Over and over I see how light skin equals privilege. Now that I have become Vaishali's mother, I realize: We need darker friends.

I can't help but worry -- I'm a Jewish mother! -- and yet so far, our non-traditional family has been met with a surfeit of loving acceptance. My fears about disapproval from the Black community for adopting a dark-skin child seem laughable now. Before, riding the subway, I received no special response, but now, Black men and women offer me and Vaishali warm smiles; they give up their seats. Do people just, as a friend hypothesized, love babies? Maybe, but this never happened to me when I toted around my equally adorable niece, nephew and godson, all of them white as snow.

It might just be Vaishali's vibe. Certainly her tiny size, enormous charm and extroverted nature would draw in anyone with a beating heart. As her mother, I am constantly on my knees before her, big-eyed with happiness at her intelligence, dead-on comic timing and fearlessness. She is so curious and ecstatic, so engaged with the world in ways I never was as a child, and rarely can be as an adult. Still, I wonder if her same spirit were encased in a lighter shell -- who would her admirers be? In the six months we have been together, my fears for my daughter have not disappeared, but I'm betting that in the battles ahead, my own good sense will prevail. Note the matter of sunscreen: two specialists, one in infectious pediatric diseases and himself half Black, the other a famous, white dermatologist, both assured me that Vaishali's dark pigment is enough of a natural sunscreen.

Vaishali's current pediatrician, a mocha-brown Indian, counter-advised me to put it on her. In the park, I approached the Black parents of a toddler the same color as Vaishali, and apologetically asked them for counsel.

"We put it on our baby and ourselves," said the mother. "Black people wear sunscreen to prevent skin cancer. We worry about our baby's skin the same as any one else." And more, I wanted to add, but I just thanked her. It became suddenly, ridiculously simple. I am my baby's protector, and I'm not taking any chances. I whipped out the SPF 45.

## COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

### Spanish Kids Learn Jewish Heritage by Baking Matzvah – in September

By Jerome Socolovsky, Sept 7 2006, JTA



It doesn't look like matzah. It doesn't feel like matzah. And it certainly doesn't taste like matzah.

But for dozens of non-Jewish kids, the doughy patties that they made with flour and water — and then fried on an electric hot plate — represented the unleavened bread Jews eat on Passover.

At least, that's what they were told on a recent Sunday morning at a matzah-baking class in this city that was a hub of medieval Jewish Spain, a place where Jews both thrived and suffered.

The class was held last weekend on European Jewish Heritage Day, when cities across Europe seek to honor their once-vibrant Jewish cultures.

In Spain, 23 cities and towns take part in the annual day. The main events were in the cities that have preserved their juderias, the quarters where Jews lived until the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Visitors today can see ancient synagogues restored and turned into museums of Jewish culture and history. In some juderias, doorposts still have holes where mezuzahs once were affixed.

The Network of Juderias sponsors tours, seminars, concerts and Sephardi culinary tastings on Jewish heritage day. In Toledo, the city with the biggest juderia, participants were offered tours of the district on Segway scooters, and free admission to the Sinagoga del Transito — the old Samuel HaLevi Synagogue that, like many others, still bears its post-expulsion name. “I wanted my children to know the culture of their city,” said Luisa Ruiz, one parent whose child was learning how to make matzah. “And Jewish culture formed — no, it forms — part of their city, because when we walk through the city, we walk through areas that used to be Jewish.”

The instructors conceded that the matzah was far from authentic — and that, yes, the class was held nowhere near Passover. Instructor David Calvo said they were adapting the baking process to make it easier for Toledo’s kids to get a feel for a Jewish custom. “It’s a nice custom with plenty of history and importance in Jewish culture, and in Toledo the Jewish heritage is one of the most important that we have,” he said.

“I suppose that we Toledanos all have Jewish ancestors. I probably have Jewish blood,” said instructor Juan Carlos Villacampa, with dark curly hair pulled back in a ponytail. “It’s important for people to know the past so that in the future they will understand that cultures are mixtures of people and that they should be tolerant.”

Jewish communities in Madrid advertised the event, but not a single Jewish child was to be found at the baking class. As he mashed the dough with his hands, Ivan Izquierdo, 11, showed that he had at least listened to the explanation about what matzah is. “It’s like bread, but without yeast,” he said. “The Jews eat it.”

After kneading the dough, the children were told to roll it flat and season it with herbs, poppy seeds and sesame seeds, then place it on the greased hot plate. The final product bore a greater resemblance to a pizza base than the Israelite bread of affliction. Victor Manuel Martin, another instructor, said organizers do try to use kosher ingredients, so that no one feels “uncomfortable or offended.”

Bemused might be a better way to describe the reaction of an American Jewish tourist who stepped out of the Transito synagogue and stopped to watch. “It doesn’t strike me as a piece of authentic Jewish culture, but perhaps that’s what you would expect” with no significant Jewish community left in Toledo, said Ed Frankel of Cincinnati. Frankel said he also happened to be in Europe last year on Jewish heritage day. But then he was visiting Amsterdam, a city that still has a significant Jewish community, where he said “the non-Jewish community was able to get a better sense of what it means to be Jewish.”

Indeed, Jewish Toledo never recovered from the expulsion five centuries ago. Though the city’s juderia was the biggest in Spain, most of Spain’s remaining 35,000 Jews are concentrated in Madrid, Barcelona, the Costa del Sol and the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the North African coast.

While the synagogue museums attest to the vibrant Jewish life that once existed in Spain’s biggest juderia, they also are a reminder of the many anti-Jewish riots and massacres that occurred here. One of Europe’s worst anti-Semitic myths — El Nino de la Guardia — involved a Christian child who supposedly was abducted here by Jews and crucified. As a result, Jews were tortured and the boy was sainted, even though his remains were never found.

“We don’t tell the children these things because they might be frightened,” said Martin, the instructor. “We try to focus on it from a more cultural and more positive point of view. There’s really no point in talking about those black legends, at least not with children who wouldn’t understand very well.” “They should have fun and get their hands messy making unleavened bread,” he continued, “and then they should eat it.”

Which they did. And though it wasn’t matzah, it actually tasted pretty good.

---

## **In China, a Growing Interest in All Things Jewish** **By Paul Mooney, Aug 11 2006, The Chronicle of Higher Education**

It’s a Friday night in the capital of the eastern coastal province of Shandong, and a group of several dozen young Chinese university students gather for dinner at an apartment just a few blocks away from the campus of Shandong University.

Save for some hummus, the dining table is weighed down with Chinese food. But this is not your typical Friday-night meal in China. First, the gathered students bow in prayer, covering their faces with their hands as candles are lit. Then, led by M. Avrum Ehrlich, a former rabbi and now a professor of Judaic studies in the School of Philosophy and Social Studies at Shandong University, the group sings songs and recites prayers together as several participants crane their necks to read the Hebrew script in shared books. The male students wear yarmulkes. One even wears a T-shirt emblazoned with a large blue Star of David.

Mr. Ehrlich finishes the ritual blessings over the wine and the bread, and offers a toast. At last the students take their seats and begin to eat, as the room fills with animated conversation.

All but two of the guests at this weekly celebration of the Jewish Sabbath in Mr. Ehrlich's apartment are Chinese students of Judaism at Shandong University. Mr. Ehrlich, a 37-year-old professor from Australia, is one of the first foreign academics to teach Hebrew Bible, Talmudic thought, and the Kabbalah in China. His ambitious plan is to put this sleepy provincial university on the map as an international center of Judaic studies.

Part of Mr. Ehrlich's pedagogy is to immerse his students in rituals central to Judaism. Thus he holds this weekly gathering at his apartment — complete with chopsticks.

"It's sort of a fusion Chinese Shabbat," he quips. Pop into any of the classrooms in the building that houses the School of Philosophy and Social Studies on Shandong's tree-shaded campus and you are likely to see students reading the Bible in Hebrew, conjugating Hebrew verbs, thumbing through the Talmud — a centuries-old collection of Jewish law and commentary — or debating the similarities between Judaism and Confucianism.

The enthusiasm for studying Judaism expressed by Mr. Ehrlich's students reflects a growing interest in that religion elsewhere in China as well, both in academe and in popular culture. Along with Shandong, 10 other Chinese universities now offer courses in Jewish studies.

Although Judaism is not one of China's five officially recognized opiates of the masses, as Lenin described organized religion — Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism — the study of its history, ritual, cultural influence, and language is on the rise here.

### **Buried Roots, New Shoots**

Little Chinese interest in Judaism was apparent until recently. The triumph of Maoist Communism after World War II was a major obstacle to studying the topic. China's Communist leaders have traditionally looked on religion with disdain, and religious studies in general has been a risky endeavor. But the country does have a long and rich history of contact with, and interest in, Jews and Judaism. A small Jewish community thrived in the city of Kaifeng, in eastern China, for 700 years. (Some of the Sinicized descendants of those early Jews remain there today.)

In the early 20th century, Chinese intellectuals, who were keen to see China modernize, looked to the Jewish experience for inspiration. In the 1920s, Yiddish literature provided an example for the development of vernacular Chinese. And Sun Yat-sen, father of the Chinese Republican revolution, praised the Zionist movement as a model for popular independence. During World War II, Shanghai, Harbin, and Tianjin served as refuges for thousands of Jews who fled into China from Europe.

The political and cultural reopening of China in the late 1970s opened the gates for the study of religion in general, and Judaism in particular, at many universities, such as the one in Jinan. But one of the most prominent Chinese scholars of Judaism says he stumbled into the field by accident. Xu Xin, 56, director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Nanjing University, was a Red Guard during the disastrous Cultural Revolution (1966-76). He was in high school when the Cultural Revolution began, and at the age of 18 was sent to the countryside to work for two years. He entered Nanjing University in 1973 as a worker-peasant-soldier and graduated three years later. As academic life returned to normal, Mr. Xu focused his attention on post-World War II American literature. He was particularly attracted to American Jewish writers — especially after Saul Bellow won the 1976 Nobel Prize in Literature. "I never thought I'd focus on Jewish literature," says Mr. Xu. "There were a hundred Chinese professors doing Bellow, Malamud, Roth, and Singer, and I was just doing a small bit."

### **The Jewish Observances**

But in order to understand those writers, Mr. Xu says, he realized that he would have to learn more about Jewish culture. So he dug into Jewish studies, taking off in 1986 to live with a Jewish family in the United States. He knew nothing about Jews at the time. He thought Hebrew was a dead language. Mr. Xu had not even met a Jew until 1985, when an American professor, James Friend, turned up at Nanjing to teach English literature for six months. The two scholars hit it off, and Mr. Xu was invited to teach for two years at Chicago State University, where Mr. Friend was chairman of the English department. During the first year, Mr. Xu lived with the Friend family, at their home in Lincolnwood, Ill.

During his first week in the United States, he attended a bat mitzvah. He then worked his way through the Jewish calendar, observing Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, and other Jewish holidays with friends and relatives of the Friends. When Mr. Friend died of a heart attack, in 1987, Mr. Xu attended a Jewish funeral as well.

The journey had a major impact on him. "When you live with someone every day for a year, you see their life and way of thinking," he says. "I lived with a Jewish family and went through all the traditions and rites. I felt the traditional Jewish way of thinking and philosophy could provide many valuable lessons for China."

For instance, he recalls learning the Jewish concept of tzedaka, or charity and justice for those in need. Jewish law commands Jews to give tzedaka according to their ability. Charity is a concept that is basically alien to most Chinese, says Mr. Xu. He tells of

his surprise when Jewish friends readily donated money to some worthy cause. "They were middle class," he says, "and I asked them why."

He also marveled at Jewish friends who regularly read the Talmud and the Torah "just for the love of learning," comparing them with Chinese colleagues, who, he says, learn just to pass exams or get better jobs. "How many Chinese scholars read Confucian classics every day?" he asks.

At the end of his trip abroad from China, he jumped at the chance to go to Israel. "My visit to Israel was just 10 days," he recalls, "but it shook me." Among Chinese people, he says, Israel is usually thought of as a war-torn country, but he was surprised by its modernity. Before heading home, he went to a bookstore and spent his remaining money on books about Judaism. "I didn't buy my wife a gift," he says, laughing. "I just bought books."

### **Finding Structure**

Upon returning to Nanjing, in 1989, as chairman of the English department, Mr. Xu set up the China Judaic Studies Association with the help of prominent American Jews. He met like-minded Chinese scholars who had studied in Europe and exchanged ideas with them. "We had a saying," he says. "'Without an understanding of the Jews, you can't understand the Western world.'"

In 1992 he established the Jewish-studies center at Nanjing, the first of its kind in China. Since then Mr. Xu has studied the Talmud at Hebrew Union College, in Cincinnati, Yiddish at Columbia University, and Hebrew again at the Ulpan Akiva, or Hebrew school, in Netanya, Israel. He has also done two stints at the Center for Judaic Studies at Harvard University, and has compiled a lengthy CV of scholarly works in English and Chinese, including monographs, scholarly articles, and translations. Most impressive among them is his work on the translation of an abridged version of the Encyclopedia Judaica, with 800-plus pages and more than 1,600 entries.

Some 300 undergraduates at Nanjing enroll each year in "Jewish Culture and World Civilization," an elective course. Although only a handful of students are in the Jewish-studies center's graduate and Ph.D. programs, Mr. Xu says he has more students applying than he can accept. "My students are excited because they've never heard these things before," he says. "They never thought they could view life in this way." Each year one Ph.D. candidate goes to Israel to study Hebrew.

The center, which is run out of a small space on the Nanjing campus, is scheduled to move in November to the Glazer Center for Judaic Studies, which was built with donations from American and British Jews. The new building will provide much-needed space for classrooms; the collection of 7,000 books, which is still growing; an exhibition room; and a conference room.

Fu Youde, a professor of philosophy at Shandong University, relates a similar tale of an accidental discovery and a rapid growth in interest and academic enterprise. Mr. Fu, who is China's leading expert on George Berkeley, the 18th-century Irish philosopher, was invited to work on a project to translate the works of Baruch Spinoza, the 17th-century philosopher of Jewish background, into Chinese.

He knew nothing about Judaism at the time, so in 1992 he traveled to the University of Oxford to study Hebrew, the Talmud, the Bible, Jewish history, and Jewish ethics. He moved on to London, where he continued his studies for one more year at Leo Baeck College, an institution of Jewish learning.

Mr. Fu never finished his ambitious translation project, but, like Mr. Xu, he came away convinced that China had a lot to learn from the Jewish tradition. "I came to realize the importance of Jewish culture, and that it could play an important role in the future of China," he says.

When he returned to Shandong, in 1994, Mr. Fu established the Center for Judaic and Interreligious Studies, a project he says the university readily supported. The center is now developing a library and research center, with books coming in from individuals and libraries all over the world. On a recent afternoon, Noam Urbach, a Hebrew teacher from Israel, stands in his office going through boxes of donated books, brushing off dust with his hand as he separates them into stacks.

### **Piquing Interest**

The program at Shandong is recruiting students from all over China and hopes to attract international students as well. It has held international conferences, playing host to international scholars who have included Elliot R. Wolfson, an expert on the Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism. Last July the Shandong center held a summer program in Jewish studies that attracted students in various disciplines from around the country.

Shandong's Mr. Ehrlich says the program is translating dozens of academic works and Jewish classics, along with 15 books by American Jewish writers, including *The Chosen*, by Chaim Potok, and *This Is My God*, by Herman Wouk.

Zhang Can, a graduate student of Mr. Ehrlich's, became interested in Judaism as an undergraduate studying philosophy. This month she plans to go to Hebrew University in Jerusalem for a year, where she will do a comparative study of the Chinese and Jewish diasporas. She will return to Shandong to complete her Ph.D.

Ms. Zhang has been studying Hebrew for a year, and Mr. Ehrlich is proud of her. He pulls a Hebrew-language book off a shelf, hands it to the young woman, and asks her to read. As her finger moves deliberately across the page, she slowly says the words aloud, translating into halting but fluent English the biblical story of Jacob.

Ask Mr. Ehrlich about China's growing fascination with things Jewish, and the talkative former rabbi ticks off a number of theories. He agrees with Mr. Xu that Chinese students and scholars feel that studying Jewish history and philosophy is an excellent starting point for understanding the fundamentals of Western civilization. But he also believes that among Chinese people, "the sense of affinity with the Jews because of a shared notion of suffering is very strong."

Mr. Ehrlich points out that in the 1970s, as China was emerging from the Cultural Revolution, the Diary of Anne Frank sold 40 million copies in that country. Chinese readers apparently identified with the plight of the young Jewish girl. The book may have "served as a canvas for observing their own condition," he says.

Chinese citizens can also benefit from adopting the Jewish notion of critical but constructive self-examination, says Mr. Ehrlich. "Many Chinese are fascinated with the absence of censorship, the liberal criticism heaped on Jewish protagonists, the lack of uniformity in thinking and practice, and the high degree of innovation exuding from the Jewish experience," he argues. "They are curious about how the Jews can remain united without consensus, without obsession with land, and without homogeneity of any sort."

A look at a list compiled by Mr. Ehrlich of some 50 scholarly articles written in China about Judaism over the past decade offers an idea of where Chinese interest lies: "The Reason Why There Are So Many Outstanding Jews"; "From the Success of Jews to Chinese Education"; "An Analysis of the Factors Behind the Cohesiveness of Jews."

Such interest has spilled into Chinese popular culture, says Mr. Ehrlich, although there the books tend to be not only more superficial but, in some cases, anti-Semitic. In the past year alone, he says, at least 10 books have been published in Chinese with titles like *The Secrets of the Jews* and *How to Be a Jewish Millionaire*.

Mr. Ehrlich is quick to emphasize, however, that the Chinese are not anti-Semitic, and that the Chinese stereotypes are "more complimentary than contemptuous."

Model of Reform

Shandong's Mr. Fu is quick to draw similar connections. He argues that of all peoples, the Jews have been the most successful in dealing with the challenges of modernity. "The goal of Jewish reform ... was to retain Jewish cultural identity by reserving Judaism while accepting modernity and merging into Western society," he says. He sees the Reform movement in 19th-century Judaism as a model for China. The movement's goal, he says, was to transform the Jew into a European, integrated into Western culture, who, at the same time, would remain faithful to his religion. "The Jews have modernized themselves materially," he says, "living a modern life in Western countries on the one hand, and they have maintained their cultural identity — namely, their Jewishness — on the other."

As China has transformed its economy into a market system, Mr. Fu continues, Chinese people have grown perplexed about who they are. "Most Chinese do not know what their cultural identity is and how to keep it," he says. "In short, they have lost their 'Chineseness' and are soulless."

Mr. Fu sees Confucianism, the social philosophy that shaped the thinking and behavior of Chinese for centuries, as playing a role similar to that which Judaism played for Jews. Although many Chinese do not deem Confucianism a religion, Mr. Fu argues that Chinese are thirsty for religion and a spiritual way of life, and that the country is a "hotbed for Confucianism to take root, sprout, and grow up." Indeed, Confucianism has enjoyed a revival in China in recent years, with scholars dusting off the writings of the man once vilified by the Communists for his "feudal" thinking, and universities offering courses in what is known as *guoxue*, or national studies.

For the time being, however, scholars such as Mr. Ehrlich, Mr. Fu, and Mr. Xu are focusing on training the next generation of scholars, both to examine Jewish studies and to see its connections to Chinese traditions both ancient and modern.

---

**Israel Will Soon Welcome From India Descendants of a “Lost” Jewish Tribe**

By Dina Kraft, Sept 26 2006, JTA



A group of 218 people from a remote mountainous corner of northeastern India who claim descent from one of the lost biblical tribes will be immigrating to Israel as recognized Jews for the first time. The aliyah of members from the Bnei Menashe community to Israel is a turning point, said Michael Freund, founder of Shavei Israel which assists “lost Jews” seeking to return to the Jewish people. “This is a major historical event, because these members of a lost tribe of Israel, after 27 centuries of wandering in exile, will at last be coming home,” he said.

News of the planned arrival in November of 218 Bnei Menashe, who have already undergone official conversion in India, was made public for the first time on Tuesday after it was leaked to the Israeli daily Yediot Achronot. The government decision to bring the 218 to Israel followed months of bureaucratic wrangling in which Israel’s Interior Ministry and Absorption Ministry balked at plans to bring them here, Freund told JTA. Advocates have been working for years to convince Israeli authorities that the Bnei Menashe were indeed long-lost Jews who had returned to the faith. They hope this group will pave the way for others in the community to also make aliyah.

The group of immigrants went through conversion courses and were approved for conversion by rabbinical judges sent to India last year by Israel’s Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar.

Amar has declared Bnei Menashe “descendants of the Jewish people” and has been working to help facilitate the aliyah of those who want to live in Israel.

To date, many of the some 1,000 members of the community – who arrived in the country as tourists and later converted to Judaism and became citizens – live in West Bank settlements. Some also lived in settlements in the Gaza Strip until last year’s Israeli withdrawal. The decision to place them predominately in settlements has drawn criticism.

Their advocates say the move was not a political but a practical decision. They say the settlements were among the only communities in the country willing to financially help the Bnei Menashe who arrived in Israel and had to spend their first year studying for conversion, without much time to hold down jobs.

Tzvi Khaute, 32, lives in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, on the outskirts of Hebron, where the largest number of Bnei Menashe reside. He welcomes the government decision to bring more of his community to Israel as Jewish immigrants for the first time. “It really is a dream come true,” said Khaute, who studies in a yeshiva part-time and works for the Shavei offices.

The group that is scheduled to arrive in November will be living for the first year in absorption centers in the northern towns of Carmiel and Nazareth Ilit.

Some 7,000 Bnei Menashe live in the northeastern Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur. They trace their descent to the tribe of Menashe, one of the 10 tribes expelled from ancient Israel by the Assyrians. They claim their ancestors wandered eastward toward China, then eventually settled to the south in what is now northeastern India and nearby Myanmar.

Most of the community converted to Christianity at the turn of the 20th century. In recent decades, some have returned to the Judaism their ancestors have practiced for centuries, including observing Shabbat, keeping the laws of kashrut, practicing circumcision on the eighth day of a baby boy’s life and observing the laws of family purity.

The Jewish Agency will be facilitating their absorption into Israel. Freund said some \$1 million in financial support for the undertaking will be provided by the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, a Chicago-based group that has raised tens of millions of dollars from Christian supporters of Israel.

## PRESERVING JEWISH HERITAGE

### Panama: New Life Along the Canal

By Moises Bassas, April 10 2006, Presentense Magazine

Shabbat morning services have already finished at Ahavat Sion, but the halls of the synagogue are still bustling with people of all ages, some simply chatting, others making their way to the various shiurim—Torah sermons—being offered to anybody willing to

listen. After-prayer shiurim were once the exclusive domain of old, stern-looking men with impenetrable Arabic accents—other congregants were already following their stomachs home by the time the cantor concluded with the words “aleinu leshabeah.” But this is no longer the case. An hour after services you can still find men and women, sitting separately, listening intently in Spanish, Hebrew, and English to lengthy expositions on the speaker’s topic of choice.

The shiurim are emblematic of a larger trend of revival in Panama’s century-or-so old Jewish community, one which is taking place in practically all facets of community life. This revival has coincided with a sustained economic boom in Panama’s economy that began in the late nineties and served to attract an ever-increasing numbers of Jews from other Latin-American countries experiencing stagnation and political turmoil, as well as from Israel. Besides simply increasing its numbers, immigration has affected the community in truly unpredictable ways. The popularity of shiurim are the legacy of a lecture by a certain Ami Bitton, for whom Panama was to be simply another itinerary item on a backpacking trip. Ami, an Israeli, instead stayed in Panama, becoming one of the biggest Torah scholars the community had ever seen.

Who or what is responsible for the community’s spiritual allure, then? Most people would probably point you toward Gran Rabino Sion Levy, who was Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef’s study partner in his youth. My father loves to recount a conversation in which he told the rabbi that he was like his father. “You would never tell your father the things you tell me!” was the rabbi’s response. Indeed, the rabbi has been both the community’s Moses and Abraham since anybody can remember, and it is he who is credited with keeping this motley, mostly Sephardic community united in its uncontrolled expansion. Or maybe it’s Aaron Lane, the Ashkenazi community’s Chabad rabbi, who works tirelessly with the kids, taking them on field trips and personally calling up high-schoolers to come “make minyan” at his shul. Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that this community is flowering in ways that few would have thought possible in the country’s darker days of dictatorship and political instability.

Yet not everything is rosy in Panama. The community’s rapid growth is finding more and more newcomers unable to integrate culturally, epidemics of pot-smoking are alleged among teenagers, and the aging Rabbi Levy is continually putting off retirement. Not everyone is equally thrilled about the community’s increasing religiosity: Panama is also home to the world’s only Sephardic Reform community, formed by families descended directly from Spanish-Portuguese Jews who accept patrilineal descent for Jewishness, making it harder and harder for them to marry into the larger Jewish community. So far, however, the community is still expanding rapidly and the after-service shiurim are as packed as ever. And, impervious to it all, the same stern-faced old men are still chanting from their Talmud in their impenetrable Arabic accents, waiting for afternoon prayers to begin.

---

## In Egypt, Remnant Carries on Rich Fabric of Jewish Tradition

By Brenda Gazzar, Sept 25 2006, JTA



During this year’s Rosh Hashanah evening service at the grand Eliahou Hanabi Synagogue, a short walk from the Mediterranean Sea here, all eyes turn toward the three foreign visitors who are making their way quietly to the front. Word spreads quickly in the women’s half of the synagogue: “We have a minyan,” a couple of elegantly dressed ladies whisper excitedly to one another.

Here in this coastal city known for its cosmopolitan flair, where only four Jewish men and 27 Jewish women remain, the prospect of having 10 males at a New Year’s service is always a reason to celebrate. The Jewish population is “getting lower and lower,” said Max Salame, the 90-year-old president of Alexandria’s Jewish community and a retired dentist, as he shared a festive New Year’s meal of beans, fried fish and pomegranates with community members. “There aren’t any more Jews.”

A Cairo-born Israeli who happened to be visiting his native country over the holiday, Salame led last Friday night’s service, which was attended by 10 Egyptian Jews, five tourists from France, three more Israelis and an American student living in Cairo. Another Israeli man, who makes the trip each year to lead the High Holiday services for the community, had to cancel after falling ill.

Following the wars with Israel in 1948, 1956 and 1973, many of Egypt’s Jews were expelled by the government or left on their own because of an increasingly difficult political situation.

Today, Egypt’s Jewish community numbers fewer than 100, some of whom are reluctant to discuss the political situation. Their

names and the languages they speak — including French, Greek, Italian and Ladino — reflect a rich and diverse heritage that stems from various waves of immigration to the country over the years.

In Alexandria, the Eliahou Hanabi Synagogue — estimated to have been built between 1836 and 1850 by Italian architects — is testament to a once-vibrant Jewish community that boasted 16 synagogues and 35,000 to 40,000 Jews around 1950. Today, members say the youngest Egyptian Jew in the city is a single male in his 30s; most Jews here are older than 65.

Lina Mattatia, 82, who has recorded births, marriages and deaths for the community for three decades, remembers when the cathedral-like synagogue was full of upscale Egyptian Jews — the women high above on a second level and the men far below. “Sometimes there were marriages inside the synagogue,” said the blue-eyed, fair-skinned and very petite Mattatia in slow, careful English. “Then, they were coming out, nice ladies, very chic, full of jewels.”

Despite the obstacles, many Jews in Egypt made a name for themselves in business. Ben Gaon, the vice president of the Jewish community in Alexandria, says his father once served as the tailor for Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. “When they kicked out the Jews in 1956 and in 1967 and in 1973, he was always in good hands,” said Gaon, 53, who wears a dark mustache and has a large portrait of Mubarak over his office desk. “Everyone liked him. They knew he was not in politics.”

Mattatia, whose parents were born in Greece, said she has remained in Egypt because her second husband, a Jewish paper salesman 23 years her senior, became ill and that made it difficult to leave the country. But her heart has always been firmly planted in this coastal city.

“I love Alexandria. I was born here and it’s my country,” said Mattatia, who speaks five languages but is most comfortable in French. “And I love Egyptian people. I love them.”

The two daughters of Victor Balassiano, 67, and his wife, Denise, left for America in 2001 at the urging of a Jewish professor at Northeastern University in Boston who visited the synagogue. Today, both daughters, 27 and 25, are graduates of Northeastern and the eldest has obtained a green card. They also have a 23-year-old son, who left the country before his sisters and is living and working in Jerusalem. “It’s very difficult to find work, for marrying” in Egypt, said Victor Balassiano, the accountant for the community in Alexandria. “The Jewish became very few. There is no future for the Jewish here.”

On a noisy street in downtown Cairo at the Shaar Hashamaim Synagogue, the armed security forces outside the synagogue outnumber the attendees by about three to one on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Among the six visitors who have come to pray Saturday, only two are Egyptian Jews. A larger crowd of mostly elderly Egyptian women, foreign visitors and members of the Israeli diplomatic corps in the country had commemorated the holiday the previous evening with a kosher meal from Israel.

During Saturday’s service led by a French visitor, the ark was opened and an elderly Egyptian woman, who appeared to be in her 70s, made her way slowly to the front to touch the Torah.

A man with a Muslim name, who said he worked for the government to keep the synagogue secure, questioned extensively this reporter about the article she was writing and whether she thought that Egyptian Jews are being treated well. If someone has said there are problems with the community, “tell me and I will resolve it,” said the man, who asked not to be identified.

On Sunday morning, the second day of the Jewish New Year, six Egyptian Jewish women came to the synagogue to hear the shofar. Among them was Celine Curial, 75, who says that even though she is fighting to reclaim property sequestered from her wealthy husband’s family by Nasser — a policy that affected all wealthy Egyptians — she loves Egypt and would never leave the country. “My pupils used to love me, to tell me, ‘You are our mother,’ ” the high school teacher of 35 years said.

If there are few Jews remaining in Egypt, Albert Arie may be the last of a dying breed: he is believed to be the only Jewish-born Communist left in the country. The 76-year-old Arie was imprisoned from 1953 to 1961 because of his political activism in the country’s largest Communist organization. Arie was sentenced to eight years hard labor at Turah Prison in Cairo, but he and other Communist prisoners refused to work.

After nine months in prison, he was taken to a detention camp at an oasis hundreds of kilometers south of Cairo. When Arie’s sentence was up, he was taken to Cairo’s Interior Ministry office to be released. After officials tried to convince him to leave the country because he was a Communist and “especially because he was Jewish,” he refused.

As a result, Arie was sent back to the detention camp for three more years, and was finally released in 1964.

Arie, who became a Communist at age 15 and was obliged to convert to Islam to marry the woman of his choice four decades ago, said he doesn’t practice any faith other than to share in Muslim feasts as a cultural event. Although he officially converted to Islam, his two sons have had occasional difficulties in relationships with other Egyptians because of their Jewish origins. But why,

Arie wonders, would anyone be interested in the Jews of Egypt today?

"It is archaeology or sociology. It's like people are digging for Pharaonic tombs," Arie said from the office of his fruit and vegetable export business. "The Jews are the same. It's the past."

---

## The Last Three Jews of Qamishli

By Sash Troy, Feb 9 2006, The Jerusalem Post



It is raining in the afternoon when I find myself walking along Sharia al-'Am, the main street of town. I pass numerous shops, peering into them to see which is most empty, until I come upon an electronics store where a group of three men sits idly, chatting among themselves. "I am looking," I announce in Arabic, "for a man named David Pinchas." The men all look at each other quizzically, so I make my inquiry clearer: "Not Muslim, not Christian."

"Jew?" one of them asks. I nod. "All the Jews have left," says another man, chuckling.

This is basically true. There are no more than 50 Jews in Damascus, and the once flourishing community of Aleppo has vanished. Here in Qamishli, the situation is about as bleak.

Damascus is a nine-hour bus ride away, and the sprint to the Turkish border is but 800 meters from here, but the regime's presence is strongly felt. In this town of 300,000 in the far northeast of Syria, pictures of former president Hafez al-Assad and his son, current president Bashar, are ubiquitous, as is praise for the Ba'ath Party.

Yet the diversity is unmistakable: stores not only have signs written in Arabic, but in Armenian and Kurdish as well. Numerous accents and languages can be heard throughout the main market. Qamishli is home to diverse ethnic and religious communities: Arabs, Turks, Armenian Christians, Kurds and, as I have been told, even Jews. Those are the ones I am looking for - relatives of a friend of mine - the last remaining Jews of Qamishli.

It was during my graduate studies at Hebrew University that I befriended an immigrant from Syria named Ya'acov. He was born in Qamishli and came to Israel in 1994, after Assad the father issued passports to the Jews of Syria. Almost all of them summarily emigrated, mostly to the United States and Israel. When Ya'acov made aliya he was 16; he still speaks Hebrew with an Arabic accent.

When I told Ya'acov I would be going to Syria for a year on a research fellowship, he was excited for me. Yet when I asked him about his remaining family in Qamishli - an uncle, aunt and one cousin - he did not encourage a visit. Fearing for my safety and his family's as well, he gave me their name but no more information than that. No address, no telephone number. Ask around, posing as a "naive tourist," Ya'acov instructed me. Then, he said, I might find them.

Back in the electronics store, one of the men decides to help a naive tourist.

"You want Abu Albert," he says, using the soft, t-less French pronunciation of the name. "Walk 500 meters down this street. The place is there," he says, pointing.

After some more asking around, I finally find the place. It is a real estate office, and when I enter it, finding an old man with four of his colleagues around him, I realize why Ya'acov had been so scared for me and for his family's safety. How will I tell this man that I know his nephew from Jerusalem - in the presence of Syrians?

I bend the truth a bit, saying I know the family from the United States (they do have family there, in any case). But none of this registers with the old man. The other men in the room eye me cautiously.

In the Arab tradition David is called Abu Albert, "the father of Albert," his first son. (Albert's Hebrew name is Avraham.) However, it is another son, Musa, who arrives about a half-hour after me, and I tell him the same story. That Musa looks exactly like his cousin Ya'acov confirms that I am in the right place, but the suspicion in his eyes is unmistakable. Though I am welcomed with customary Arab hospitality, offered tea and brought into discussion about my time in Damascus, I think of how I can tell my friend's family who I am and the real reason for my visit in Qamishli.

The opportunity finally comes when Musa closes the office for the day. As we walk out, he grabs me by the arm and asks, still in

Arabic, if I want to speak alone. I nod. We take a ride around town in his car, at which point I tell him that I am Jewish, that I know his cousin Ya'acov from Israel, and that Ya'acov gave me information about the family in Qamishli. I take out the pictures I had taken of Ya'acov's family before I left Israel.

Having established my identity and my connection to the family, I feel somewhat relieved. We drive to a restaurant in town and sit down to a large meal of grilled fish, hummus, baba gannoush, french fries, beer, Arab salad and pita, and order nargilas to smoke. What's left of Musa's family - he is one of eight children, the rest of whom have left for the United States and Israel - straddles the line between prosperity and ruin. His parents are old, and he has taken over the family business, which include numerous real estate and construction projects in both Qamishli and Aleppo. In fact, the restaurant where we had dined is located in a five-story building that the Pinchases' company had financed.

While he does not say so explicitly, Musa implies that leaving Syria would mean losing all of these investments. The average Syrian makes about \$3,000 annually. Musa says he made close to \$100,000 per year.

My mind is racing with questions about what life is like for Musa and his parents, the last three Jews in Qamishli. But before I can ask any of them, he asks me one of his own. "Do you eat meat?" I nod - earning a stern look from Musa.

"You mean you eat unkosher meat?" The question takes me completely by surprise. I am not a vegetarian, and while I don't eat chicken and beef all the time, I do eat them. And, I note, there is not exactly a plethora of kosher butchers in Damascus. I don't even know where to buy kosher meat, I say. "Where do you get kosher meat from?" I ask.

Musa explains that the Jewish community in Damascus has a relationship with a shochet in Turkey, who delivers kosher meat and chicken to them on a regular basis. When Musa goes to Damascus on business, he picks up kosher meat. It was if to say, I drive nine hours to get kosher meat, imported from another country, and you eat treif?

"And you keep Shabbat as well?" I ask. "Of course," he replies. Proof comes presently. As we finish the rest of the grilled fish and order our sweet tea, I am invited to the Pinchases' home for Shabbat - my first Shabbat in Syria with Jews, in fact.

In Jerusalem, Jews are used to the Friday afternoon air siren that announces the arrival of Shabbat. In Qamishli, as in the rest of Syria, the muezzin (Muslim prayer caller) announces the maghreb prayer at sunset. For the Pinchas family, the muezzin's "Allahu Akbar" at sunset indicates the start of Shabbat.

Musa lives with his parents, David and Simcha, in a rather large apartment. During a brief tour of the house, he shows me the spot on the wall of the living room commemorating Jerusalem, and a metal wall hanging with the Ten Commandments written in Hebrew in the dining room.

Then, as my eyes turn from the words in Hebrew to the adjacent wall, my jaw drops. There hangs a large, framed picture of the dictator with the caption, "General Hafez Assad, President of the Syrian Arab Republic." "Isn't that a little strange, to have the Ten Commandments and Hafez Assad on display in the same room?" I ask Musa.

"Why should it be?" he replies. "In the United States, synagogues have the American flag on one side and the Israeli flag on the other. This is the same thing." David, the patriarch of the family, agrees. At 70, he has weathered the coups, rebellions and political turmoil that mark Syria's 20th-century history, which ended with Assad's taking of power in 1970 and the establishment of political stability heretofore unknown. In September of 2005, as a representative of the Jewish community - or, as the Syrian government refers to it, the "Mosaic" community - David and Musa were invited to Damascus to meet with President Bashar Assad. Two walls of their downtown office feature large photographs of the encounter.

Over a dinner of chicken, rice and vegetables, I tell the family about their cousins in Israel, and we sing zemirot from the family siddur. And then we discuss the virtues of Assad. "The president wants peace with Israel," David says. "And he wants the Jews to return. We met with him for an hour and he was a very good man. He talked about his life in London, when he went to the kosher butcher shop to buy meat [that was ritually fit for a Muslim to eat]. He wants to improve relations between Jews and other Syrians."

The Pinchases are supportive of Israel; in their home on Friday afternoon, we all watched Israeli TV via satellite, with me translating the Hebrew reports of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's condition into Arabic for them. Anything Jewish or Israeli excites them - but there is a sort of emotional wall between them and Jews outside Syria, and especially family living in Israel.

Ya'acov calls the Pinchases frequently (they cannot call him), but in general they seem to view their family in Israel as people who have moved on and left them in Syria. It is as if those who left for the Jewish state have crossed a diplomatic boundary. The Pinchases, sighing, view them as people of their past whom they will never see again.

"What are you still doing here?" I ask Musa. "Don't you get lonely here? Don't you want to get married and have a family of your own? Doesn't being Jewish cause problems for you?"

For decades, Jews have given up everything to come to the US or Israel. Musa, who looks much younger than his 32 years, isn't ready to do so. "All of my friends here know I'm Jewish, it's no problem," he replies. "I have friends who are Christian, Muslim, Kurdish. Everyone knows I'm Jewish, I don't have to hide it. I am not ready to have a family yet. I go out with some girls, but it's nothing serious. I work a lot, and to relax I go to restaurants with my friends."

"So, what are you," I ask finally, "Syrian, Arab, or Jewish?"

"I am all three," Musa replies. "I am Jewish, but I am also an Arab and a Syrian. There is really no contradiction between these three things. I was born Jewish, but I was also born in an Arab country, in Syria."

## ARTS & CULTURE

### Vietnamese Israeli family takes a long trip 'home'

by Tom Tugend, August 22 2006, JewishJournal.com



In 1977, an Israeli cargo ship nearing Japan spotted a leaking boat crammed with 66 Vietnamese men, women and children out of food and water. They were among the hundreds of thousands of "boat people," fleeing their war-ravaged country following the end of the Vietnam War. Despite desperate SOS signals, the refugees' distress had been ignored by passing ships from East Germany, Norway, Japan and Panama.

The Israeli ship picked up the weakened passengers and took them back to Israel. There, Prime Minister Menachem Begin authorized their permanent admission to Israel, comparing their plight to that of Europe's Jewish refugees seeking a haven in the 1930s. What happened to the Vietnamese refugees, and the hundreds that followed them, in "the land of the Jews"?

In one of the opening scenes of the Israeli film "The Journey of Vaan Nguyen" Hanmoi Nguyen, one of the original refugees, has been in Israel for 25 years. He works hard in a Tel Aviv restaurant, lives modestly, and with his wife is raising five Israel-born, Hebrew-speaking daughters. The oldest girl, Vaan, is a writer, has served in the army and feels Israeli -- except for her looks. In their classic up-front style, her fellow sabras keep asking her whether her eyes are slanted because she eats so much rice and if she is related to this or that Chinese martial arts star. In the evenings, the father writes Vietnamese poetry and joins his friends in nostalgic songs about the beautiful land they left behind.

In Vietnam, Hanmoi Nguyen was the son of a wealthy landowner, and he dreams of returning to his village to reclaim the property and settle scores with the communist functionary who kicked him out at gunpoint.

He scrapes together enough money for the trip and returns to a land and a people he hardly recognizes. In a curious parallel to the Holocaust survivors who returned to their homelands to reclaim their old homes, he is met with suspicion and hostility by the new inhabitants and red tape by officials. Even the hated communist functionary, like the Nazi bully in Germany, is now a nice old man who urges that bygones be bygones.

After a few months, daughter Vaan joins her father to dig for her own roots. She is happy that people on the street look like her, but has trouble negotiating the language and has no patience with the elaborate circumlocutions of social intercourse. To the natives, Vaan herself has become a foreigner, and she laments, "I am a tourist, I am an Israeli."

The agony of being suspended between two civilizations, without being fully at home in either one, is sensitively, at times heartbreakingly, portrayed, but the film by Israel's Duki Dror (a UCLA alumnus) is not without humor.

One hilarious scene shows the newly arrived boat people being welcomed by an effusive Jewish Agency representative in Hebrew, of which the polite audience doesn't understand a word. Shortly afterward, an equally enthusiastic integration official tries to teach the refugees a lively Chanukah song. On the reverse side, the returned father tries to explain Israel to puzzled Vietnamese villagers. He finally comes up with, "They have one lake and eat strange foods."

## One Rapper Who Can't Seem To Blend In

By Rachel Breitman, Sept 8 2006, Forward.com



Yitzchak Jordan can't seem to blend in. In the Baltimore Baptist church he occasionally attended as a child, his passion for Judaism was an oddity.

Now a convert to Judaism, the African American rapper known as Y-Love feels at home in the Hasidic community of Brooklyn's Flatbush area, but his dark skin and leftwing politics keep him outside the mainstream.

But Jordan doesn't care to win favor with mere mortals. As he declares in his song "Slave to the Creator," he will not be "a slave to slaves." Though beholden to none but God, the 28-year-old Haredi hip-hop artist has a few fellow travelers to whom he gives shout-outs.

Born Sean Jordan to Ethiopian and Puerto Rican parents, he found understanding for his early stirrings of faith from his maternal grandmother, Clara Lopez. Named after the matriarch of a Jewish family that once gave her father a job, Lopez had served as a "Shabbos goy" and wasn't shocked when 7-year-old Sean donned a yarmulke to observe Passover.

"As I started separating myself from the rest of the family, she acted as my interpreter," recalled Jordan, in an interview with the Forward.

Now his music fills that role, translating his faith into freestyle rhymes and danceable beats for diverse audiences. Jordan's devotion to music is tempered by a religious fervor that precludes him from performing on Jewish holidays or until 72 minutes after the Sabbath's end. Within these parameters, he will tour college campuses on the East Coast this fall, and appear in New York this month at Irving Plaza, in a Palestinian and Jewish hip-hop showcase at S.O.B.'s and in the all-day music festival Jewzapalooza at Riverside Park.

An early fan of heavy metal and punk rock, he first became interested in hip-hop while studying in Israel. At Ohr Somayach yeshiva in Jerusalem, Jordan met a fellow student, David Singer, and the two began memorizing talmudic texts via rap. "I called him Y-Love, because it has a double meaning, like the question, 'why love?'" Singer remembered. Singer said he advised Jordan not to hide his identity or try to pass as a Yemenite Jew. "I always tell him, part of your genius and your beauty is that you don't have to fit in," he said.

Ohr Somayach was also where Jordan met his current manager, Erez Shudnow, known professionally as DJ Handler. A college radio hip-hop connoisseur, Handler was awed by the ease with which Jordan mixed verses of English, Yiddish, Hebrew and Aramaic. In October, Handler's record label, Modular Mood, will release a selection of tracks from Jordan's first album, "This Is Babylon," before the full-length version appears next spring.

In early 2007, Jordan will tour Europe, Israel, Canada and the West Coast. But of all these far-flung venues, it is in his Brooklyn neighborhood that his words may be met with the most shock. Though rap isn't an entirely novel medium to the Hasidic community — such groups as Ta Shma, and the rapper JewDa Maccabi, are also exploring the marriage of hip hop and Hebrew — Jordan's songs do more than set biblical stories to a synthesized beat. "Yitzchak is in many ways on the avant-garde," said Moshe Axelrod, guitarist of the frum rock group Eden. "Rap is borrowed from a secular idiom, and he is using it as a medium to express his faith."

Jordan's music also raises eyebrows with its criticism of the Orthodox Jews' support for neoconservatism. His hard-edged track "6000" offers an apocalyptic condemnation: "See Bush tried for his crimes live on Al-Jazeera!" There is also the line "Desecrating the sacred put Sharon on his back." After teaching himself Arabic in order to read Islamic Web sites and the Quran, he is confident that peace in the Middle East can be achieved only through more fundamentalist interpretation of religious texts. "A religious Jew and a religious Muslim are on more of the same page than a religious Jew and a religious Christian," Jordan said in an interview.

But he is also incensed by the secular. He disapproves of immodest dress and mixed dancing. At a kick-off event for the Sephardic Music Festival, sponsored by Heeb magazine, he refused to perform until the show's kitschy blow-up dolls and animated pornography were removed from his view. His song "State of the Nation" bemoans the lack of Orthodoxy evidenced in the National Jewish Population Survey, and in another song he argues, "The cesspool of secularism turned its back on me."

Still, Jordan isn't looking to reject his secular fans but rather to bring them into the big, unusual tent of his music. "If you are only going to get the message out to people who dance separately and dress modestly," he said, "you aren't going to get the message out."

## From Bollywood to the Sands of Jerusalem

By Aimee Ginsburg, April 17 2006, The Jerusalem Report



The death of Nadira, the great Indian movie star, marks the end of an era rich with Jewish actors. But the Jews of Mumbai are mourning more than her loss.

Reading about the life of Nadira, who died in Mumbai on February 8 at age 74, it is hard to keep in mind that it all happened in India and not Hollywood. The colorful stories about her are reminiscent of the American cinema queens of the late 40s and 50s; she was famous, among other things, for the way she arched her eyebrows, or, later, for her one too many drinks, alone in her modest apartment. And she was admired always for being an independent thinker, although this was arguably either a compliment or a polite euphemism. With her death, India lost its last great Jewish movie star.

Indeed, the fact of her Jewishness was mentioned in every one of her many obituaries. This constant reminder might itself arch a few eyebrows, were Mumbai (Bombay) not known for its love of its tiny Jewish population of 5,000. Whereas in Hollywood, a star's religion, particularly her Jewishness, would likely not appear in the lead paragraph of her bio, in India, the statement pinpoints Jewishness as part of her identity.

Nadira was born Farhat (Florence) Ezikiel in 1932 into the prosperous, cultured and relatively Westernized community of Baghdadi Jewish immigrants to India. Discovered in her late teens, she was cast, to the great reluctance of her mother, in 1952 in the lead role in *Aan*, a Bollywood classic about a simple man winning over a haughty princess, opposite the then-reigning melodrama king, the great Dilip Kumar (né Muhammad Yusuf Khan, a Muslim from Afghanistan). It is said that while she was selected for her glowing skin, sharp features and European looks, she proved more than an intriguing beauty--she had a commanding presence on screen as well.

The movie's success and her prowess in front of the cameras made her a star overnight, and the leading roles kept coming. In 1955, she starred in *Shree 420* opposite the legendary Raj Kapoor. "Nadira's lacquered, diamond-studded character comes across as a beacon of danger, with her eyes flashing fire and brimstone," wrote one enchanted critic at the time.

In an obituary, a Bollywood reporter recalled: "Her smoking . . . with a cigarette holder became a fashion statement, although she maintained that she never smoked in real life." One of her songs in the film, "Mud Mud Ke Na Dekh" (Don't Look Back), remained a hit for decades. Nadira lore has it that her dress for this song was stitched so tight she couldn't sit down. But "the agony was worth it," she told an interviewer years later. "Even today, at the racetrack, people sing the song to me when they see me."

After a while, she was cast not only as a leading lady but as a vamp and a villain, in roles that needed someone who could play a determined character, "her own woman." Her friends say she didn't mind, that she was proud of her ability to play these parts. "She had good looks," Kumar has said, "but it wasn't about that. She had crystal-clear thoughts. She was unusually present. She was always ahead of her times."

Bollywood, like Hollywood, has always been filled with a disproportionately high number of Jews. Even in the golden days of the Mumbai Jewish community, in the few decades before 1947, when India gained independence and most Jews immigrated to Israel, it numbered only around 30,000. Jonathan Samuel Solomon, whose grandfather ran the Bombay Film Lab, a leading movie production studio, explained the Jewish prominence to an online Bollywood film magazine: "Before India's independence, in the '30s and in the '40s, it was harder to cast Hindu and Muslim girls in films. Their homes tended to be very traditional, and this was not seen as a respectable occupation for a woman. The Jewish girls grew up in more liberal, Westernized households; they were educated, intelligent, and with fairer skin and sharper features. The producers and directors really liked the Jewish girls."

One of the many to benefit from these preferences was Firoza Begum, born Susan Solomon, who was hugely popular in the 1920s and '30s. Another was Ruby Meyers, known as Sulochana, a half-Ashkenazi, half-Indian Jew born in 1907. A silent movie star in the '30s, one of her most notable films was *Wild Cat of Bombay* (1936), in which she played eight different roles. In 1975, she acted alongside Nadira in *Julie*, for which Nadira picked up the Filmfare best supporting actress award, Bollywood's equivalent of the Oscar. The long list of Jewish stars also included Pramila, the first Miss India; Romala (Rachel Hayam Cohen); and Aaron Joshua, a prizefighter-turned-actor.

The Jewish presence could be felt elsewhere in the business as well: Parlaying her acting success into creative power, Ruby Meyers founded her own movie studio in the mid-'30s, Rubi Pics. And the screenplay for the first Indian full-length talkie, *Aam Ara* ("Light of the World") in 1931, a story of two rival queens, a prince and a peasant boy, was written by Joseph David. "After watching the premiere," wrote his granddaughter Joanna Ezikiel, "he would have gone home to a kosher meal." And of course there was the Calcutta-born Ezra Mir, known as Edwin Myers, the first chief of the government's India Film Division, who produced and directed more than 300 documentaries and short films.

Nadira was the last in this line, and the most exalted. She was among the busiest actors of her time, with all the trappings of a movie star--the cars (she was one of the first in Bollywood to own a Rolls Royce), the jewels and the glamour. "Even as she got older and played mostly character roles," one film critic wrote in an obituary, "she played them with a difference. She added a rare dignity and spirit to the roles of mother, aunt or any older woman."

Her career spanned almost 50 years, with roles in more than 60 movies and television series, including a part, her last on TV, in a 2002 episode of the horror series Shh... Koi Hai ("Someone Is There..."). In 1999 she had a role in Ismail Merchant's Cotton Mary, which explored British and Anglo-Indian cultural identities; and in 2000 she made her final film appearance, in Josh, an Indian version of West Side Story.

In 1997's Tamanna, she played an aging movie star pining for her lost glory--a taste, perhaps, of Nadira's own reality later in life, which saw the once-formidable woman mostly alone, and by some accounts, lonely. She had two former husbands: Her first marriage, to Makel Naqshab, a poet of the Urdu language of the Muslims of northern India and Pakistan, ended unhappily; her second, to a man described in Bollywood gossip columns as only "out to get her money," ended after one week. Nadira's two brothers had emigrated long ago, one to the United States and one to Israel, and, as a Jewish neighbor told The Jerusalem Report, "they never came up."

Some of her Bollywood friends would drop by to visit Nadira; some came to use her excellent and well-maintained library, filled with books about Shakespeare, Swami Vivekananda, Judaism and Jewish philosophy, and world history. It was said she loved music and discussing current events. And the aging star was a favorite of the neighborhood kids--on her birthday, December 5, shortly before she was hospitalized, they went round to her house where they were treated to cake and biryani (spicy yellow rice pilaf).

"She was lonely, but it was her own making," says Solomon Sopher, head of the Iraqi Jewish community in India and chairman of the Sassoon Trust, which oversees the synagogues, libraries and the Sassoon Jewish day school in Mumbai. In the last few years, Sopher arranged to have special Iraqi Jewish food sent to Nadira every Shabbat, and this, he recalls, delighted her. "She was proud to be Jewish, she always observed the High Holy Days, came to synagogue and cared about Shabbat," he says. "She knew more about Judaism than most of our so-called leaders." Nadira left her Judaica and carpet collections to the Sassoon Synagogue.

But the Jewish community's long and endearing relationship with Nadira took a strange turn at the end of her life. She intended to be cremated, as is the custom of the Hindu majority in India, and when she revealed this to Sopher, he was adamant that she choose a Jewish burial instead. "I told her that she would have no place with us in olam haba [the world to come]," he says. "I begged her. She said that cremation seemed more tidy, more neat, but I did not stop until I seemed to have changed her mind." But soon after their last conversation, Nadira entered the hospital and lost consciousness. When she passed away, from complications arising from meningitis and a liver disorder, the cremation order was still in her will. "She even specified in the will not to be cremated on Shabbat," Sopher maintains, "and that her ashes were to be spread in the sands of Jerusalem." And although he could never agree with cremation, Sopher changed course. "The rabbis say this is not allowed, they are not in agreement with me, but I am trying to find a way to honor her wishes, somehow."

Her friends from the movie world, many of whom arrived for the cremation ceremony, spoke of her admiringly, lovingly, eulogizing her independent mind and her tendency to be ahead of her times. They did not seem aware that the cremation they had just witnessed had left the Jewish community shocked, even heartbroken. "I could not even do the ashkava ritual for her, since she was not buried," laments Sopher, who considered Nadira a beloved friend. "I said a few psalms, there was nothing else I could do. It is hard to describe how we felt. To describe this pain. The saddest thing about Nadira's life was her death."

[Home](#) | [Projects](#) | [Publications](#) | [Social Change](#) | [Media](#) | [About IJCR](#) | [Donate](#)