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Mishpacha



ON SITE

East Winds Blowing

An opportunity to do a bris in Japan and a chance to meet the man behind Korean Talmud study were enough of an incentive to fly to East Asia. We didn't find remnants of the Ten Lost Tribes, but thousands of miles from home, "Jewish" has become its own status

WHAT DOES A WANDERING
JEW WHO'S FOUND HIS POT
OF GOLD AT THE END OF
THE EARTH DO WHEN HE
NEEDS TO MAKE A BRIS
FOR HIS NEWBORN SON?

Well, this new father, who had been living in Japan for years making his fortune in the diamond business, happens to be the son of Rabbi Yaakov Meidan, rosh yeshivah of the Har Etzion hesder yeshivah in Alon Shvut and my personal rebbi. But in the Land of the Rising Sun, there are no local mohelim, so on those rare occasions when a bris is performed, a mohel is either flown in from Hong Kong or Eretz Yisrael. Because circumcision is not common in Japan, and the new father was concerned about complications and post-bris care, he wanted a mohel with some medical knowledge, and that's how I wound up on this recent trip to East Asia, with the honor of performing a bris for the grandson of my rebbi.

GRABBED
OPPORTUNITIES

J

Japan can be a bit of a shock for us Westerners. Tokyo is a city of 30 million people but the streets are quiet — you rarely hear honking of horns and people walk past without engaging, self-absorbed and disconnected, except possibly for the newest electronics fad. Respect for elders is of overriding importance, and education and success is drilled into children from an early age.

Losing face in any interaction is a terrible thing and people might say no when they mean yes if it means maintaining self-respect, and rigidity of behavior and obedience to societal norms and expectations appear to weigh heavily on the population. In fact, suicide is 60 percent higher than the global average. Extreme pressure is imposed to

succeed, and failure reflects badly on the family, which can cause depression and is expressed most unusually with a unique Japanese phenomenon of *hikikomori* — acute social withdrawal said to affect nearly half a million Japanese youth who can't take the pressure imposed on them. These modern-day hermits notwithstanding, the country that was near-completely demolished after World War II harnessed those very behaviors and cultural expectations and grew to be one of the world's financial and technological powerhouses in the last 60 years.

Naturally, Jews didn't miss out on the opportunities — both for safety and stability — that arose on this Pacific island. The earliest Jewish settlers arrived in the 1860s as Japan became open to the outside world. David Sassoon, the East's wealthiest man and a religiously devoted Iraqi Jew who had settled in India, dispatched one of

his sons to Japan to expand the family business. (Other wealthy Jews living in India saw Hong Kong, a Western-controlled island off Mainland China, as a flourishing opportunity. Britain needed huge quantities of tea, but it was creating a trade imbalance in as so much silver was being spent on tea that the coffers were being emptied. Millions of Chinese were addicted to opium and India had cheap opium in spades, so fortunes were made by buying tea cheaply with opium and selling it at a profit.)

Many of the early settlers did fabulously well in business. By 1895 the first shul was opened by about 50 families. Nagasaki, a port city developed by the Portuguese (one of the two cities destroyed by the atom bomb ending World War II) had double the number of families. The Jewish community of Kobe, Japan, was initially formed by escaped Jewish Russian prisoners of war who had participated in the Russian revolution of 1905.

PROTOCOLS
BOOMERANG

A small cadre of Japanese officers, however, were exposed to the virulently anti-Semitic book, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The book, written in 1905 and translated into many languages with reprints until today, claims to be the minutes of a meeting of Jews trying to gain global domination, and therefore, all of society’s evils are caused by the Jews in order to increase their wealth and power. (The book caught the eye of the well-known anti-Semite, Henry Ford, of Ford motor cars, and he translated and published 500,000 copies of it in the US.) The text caused great suffering and attacks against Jews ever since its publication — the exposure of these Japanese officers to it ironically had the opposite effect.

In 1932, Japan conquered a huge area of China called Manchuria. Lacking the resources to develop it and being turned down by banks due to the great depression, they turned to the “rich Jews” who agreed to give them loans. Lacking workers and resources, Japan contemplated bringing millions of Jews to the Japanese sphere of influence in China in order to exploit their wealth, brains, and ingenuity. While it failed as a global plan, Japan did stand strong against Germany — it’s ally — despite great pressure from the Nazi regime to expel the Jews during World War II.

Of course, one can’t talk about Jewish Japan without mentioning the well-known heroism of Mr. Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese vice-consul in Lithuania, who saved thousands of Jews during the war by issuing transit visas to Japan. Legally he couldn’t provide the masses of Jews who converged on the consulate with immigration papers, but he could offer a transit visa if they had an entry permit to another country and the funds to travel. No country was offering large numbers



Having a foreigner deal in the prestigious tuna market was unheard of until David, a Jewish businessman, broke into the fray

of Jews immigration visas, but the Dutch consul, Jan Zwartendijk, was willing to offer a stamp to the Dutch colony of Curacao. So against the express orders of his superiors, Sugihara issued thousands of visas to Japan. By the time he was recalled, he was inundated by thousands of refugees, and even while boarding the train as he left Lithuania, he was furiously writing visas and stamping passports for Jews clambering around the train. As

time ran out and the train began to pull away from the station, he simply flung pre-stamped, official Japanese stationery from the moving locomotive to be filled out later by any Jew lucky enough to grab one. With the impending destruction of Europe’s Jews and the entire European yeshivah world, it was Sugihara who granted the visas for hundreds of members of the Mir yeshivah who found refuge in Shanghai, the Chinese city conquered by Japan.



With their tefillin-like headgear and tallis-like robes, could Shinto priests be a link to ancient lost Jews?



Rabbi Mendi Sudakevitch and his wife Chana are a nurturing influence on Tokyo’s small Jewish community

ARE YOU
JEWISH
TOO?

We’ve been all over the world, and have seen firsthand how popular it is to be considered a remnant of the Ten Tribes. Almost every continent has groups claiming descent. They range from Africa to Papua New Guinea, from Great Britain to the Americas. Why shouldn’t the Japanese people’s ancestry originate with them as well?

The early Christian missionaries who circled the globe to convert pagans often thought they had stumbled on a “Lost Tribe” based upon certain precarious data. It was enough that a group of people were good businessmen, had

customs similar to Jewish ones, or even had Jewish-looking facial features, and their connection to the Ten Tribes was cemented. The priestly class of Japan, most notably the emperor, is an example. The royal family — including the current emperor Akihito and his father Hirohito — do look a bit different than the average Japanese person, with their “Jewish” nose. So rumors still swirl around today that the royal family is of Jewish descent. Another fascinating, although improbable link are the religious garments of the Shintu priests. They wear a leather item on their heads that looks a bit like tefillin, and a fringed garment, reminiscent of a tallis. But both reason and DNA don’t seem to support the theory.

Today there are a hundred or so Jews living in Japan, mostly in Tokyo, almost all for business reasons. The Chabad House, run by Rabbi Mendi and Chana Sudakevich, is the center of any traditional Jewish life left on the island. They catered the official visit of Binyamin Netanyahu to Japan in 2014, a visit that fueled its own rumors of kinship between the Japanese and the Jews following an unusually long and not protocol-correct private meeting between the Israeli prime minister and the Japanese emperor.

And so, with our knives safely packed away in our luggage in the cargo compartment, we landed in Tokyo — and as we walked out of the airport, there was my rosh yeshivah waiting with his son. He was so excited about the entire thing, and especially that I was doing the bris, that he crushed me in a hug and refused to sit in the front seat of the car. On Shabbos we davened in Chabad, and although Shacharis begins at 10:00, the early risers were treated to an intimate Tanach *shiur* by Rabbi Meidan, thousands of miles away from his home base.

The community is multifaceted, its members each with their own background. One man we met, a New Yorker named David, came to Japan 20 years ago and went into the tuna business. Tuna in Japan is like gold — one of the country’s most precious commodities. Both the fresh fish and the deep-frozen ones are auctioned regularly at 4 a.m. We think of tuna in a can, but a fish can easily weigh more than a human. The Japanese use special double-handled knives three feet long and, with the expertise of a surgeon, filet those huge fish. Each fish can sell for tens of thousands of dollars. Since Japan is a very xenophobic country, having a foreigner as a dealer in the prestigious fish market was unheard of until David arrived. Despite threats and warnings to leave, he remained as the only official foreigner allowed to stay in the market.

Of course, it’s not easy to maintain a high level of Yiddishkeit in Japan, and those who have settled here understand that there’s no strong religious future for their kids if they remain, so they face a dilemma of Jewish parents the world over: how to educate and inculcate a love of Judaism, a particularly complicated issue for those families who have become closer to Orthodoxy under the nurturing influence of the Sudakeviches.

Mishpacha

SPLIT IN TWO

On the other side of the Sea of Japan lies the Korean peninsula (Seoul is about 650 miles from Tokyo), where rumor has it that supposedly a million South Koreans are studying the Talmud. The draw to investigate this phenomenon was too strong to pass up, so a hop to Seoul, the capital of South Korea, ensued.

Korea was originally conquered by Japan in 1910; after World War II, Russia and the US divvied up their sphere of influence, with Communism finding a foothold in the north of the country and a democratic regime in the south. Since the Korean War in the early 1950s, entire families that were separated by the demarcation have had no contact.

South Korea is a commercial and technological dynamo while North Korea barely has a foothold in the 20th century. It is called the “hermit kingdom” because its borders are sealed — the Internet is not available and communications in or out are strictly policed. Three generations of despotic, paranoid, and eccentric rulers have run the country since inception — not having a portrait of the “dear leader” in one’s house could mean exile and death in a labor camp. Because of a successful and uncontrolled bid to create a nuclear bomb and missile technology — the burning issue between President Trump and Kim Jong Un — economic sanctions have crippled the country over the last

decades. In fact, since the beginning of 2018, Japan has instituted nuclear attack drills, and a mistaken press of the wrong warning button (it happened in Hawaii as well) recently caused widespread panic.

The high-income, G-20 economy of South Korea stands in stark contrast to its sister country just over the most fortified border in the world. With a population of 25 million, nearly nine million North Koreans are in the military, making it the world’s fourth-largest standing army. There is so little electricity in North Korea that a nighttime satellite picture from space shows the entire world lit up with electricity, but a black area where North Korea appears. Current leader Kim Jong Un’s father, Kim Jong il, presided over a famine in the 1990s where two million people starved to death needlessly. Had he been more politically flexible, other countries would have stepped in and helped. And under the current regime, hunger remains a way of life: 41% of North Koreans, or about 10.5 million people, suffer from malnutrition, yet if the country would comply with demands to close the nuclear program, food and money would likely flood in. Interestingly, the Jews are, for once, not the target of their animus: Their missiles are aimed at the United States.

HEADS UP



I always prefer wearing a yarmulke to a hat on my travels if I can get away with it, which is what I did on my way back from Korea, via Turkey. When I landed in Istanbul, I went to change my Korean money into dollars, handing the Muslim man in the change store the Korean currency, for which he handed me a \$50 note. I thought I was owed more, but he looked at the screen and said no, it was only \$50.

I had already passed security and was at the gate for the flight to Tel Aviv, when I suddenly saw a security guard approaching me along with the money changer. He came up to me and with such earnestness said, “My brother, I made a mistake in the calculation and did not give you enough money.” He explained that he didn’t have my name, but he remembered that I was wearing a yarmulke. He looked at the departing flights board, saw a flight to Israel and thought maybe he would find me there. Again he said, “My brother, please forgive me.” Once in a while, a nice surprise awaits a Jew with a *kippah*.

EVERYONE’S LEARNING TALMUD



While Korea has never been home to Jews other than US army soldiers and a Chabad House in Seoul, rumors have abounded that a million Koreans regularly study the Talmud. How and when did the Gemara make its way to the Korean Peninsula? Is it really true that Talmud study has overtaken the country as the newest fad? Readers surely know how complicated it is to learn a *sugya*, as well as how much basic Torah

knowledge is needed in order to understand fundamental Talmudic concepts.

We tried to locate those masses of people who could be teaching Gemara to the Koreans. Our research brought us to Mr. Kim, cofounder of Havruta Education Association (HEA), and he agreed to meet and discuss (through a translator) Gemara and general Jewish learning.

He took out some books in Korean that I understood were about the Talmud. He even took out his Schottenstien *Bava Kamma* and was proud to show me the highlighted and underlined areas where

GEMARA KOP

Mr. Kim and another handful of people might actually learn the Talmud, but the millions who supposedly learn Gemara might have once read a book about it. While in a rest stop on the highway, Mr. Kim and I strolled by a bookstore, where we found a book about the Talmud being sold on the shelves.

So what is the phenomenon about? Why the huge interest? We know that the perception of many non-Jews is that all Jews are smart and rich, that they control the finances in America as well as manage the TV and movie industries. The number of Jewish Nobel prizewinners far exceeds the Jewish percentage of the general population.

So Mr. Kim, like many Koreans, is convinced that the Jewish edge is because of the Gemara, and especially because of the concept of *chavrusa* learning. Thinking about it, it’s really true that there is something uniquely Jewish about this approach — two friends trying to understand a complex *sugya*. They dissect it and look at it from many angles. They read Rishonim and Acharonim and try to anticipate what the rebbi will explain and grapple with in the *shiur*. Then the rebbi gives the *shiur*, clarifying questions and complexities, and then there is *chazarah*, review. That means the topic has been studied at least

he had learned a *sugya* in English. In some respects, it was even more surreal than finding some tribe deep in the jungle singing Jewish songs and wearing talleisim. After an extensive conversation, it became clear that Korea will not become the new home for beis medrash, *l’Sheim Shamayim* Gemara learning, though.

Here is the real story, according to Mr. Kim: Millions of people in Korea *do not* learn the Talmud. In the 1970s, Rabbi Marvin Tokayer, a rabbi in Tokyo, wrote a book about the Talmud — stories and lessons from the Gemara — that was translated into Japanese, and then into Korean. Since then, about two million copies have been printed. In reality, then, it seems that millions of people actually know a little bit about the Talmud, and that minimal knowledge is quite widespread. While driving through a small farming village in the countryside, we happened upon a Christian priest and a young woman. The priest was familiar with it and the young lady told me that she had “read the Talmud” before she was 12 years old. In fact, according to Mr. Kim, a huge number of Korean children — possibly millions — read this book about the stories and lessons from the Talmud while in grade school, and it makes a tremendous impact upon them.

three times — and Mr. Kim, at least, is convinced it’s the secret of Jewish success.

Mr. Kim opened the Havruta institute to teach teachers about the concept.

He explained that Korean traditions of respect and obedience create an environment where one is not allowed to ask questions in a class — it’s considered disrespectful. I laughed and told him the

Mishnah from *Avos*: “A bashful person cannot learn and the rigid teacher cannot teach,” and how most of our classes were riotous with the noise of learning, questioning, and even disagreement with a teacher.

His associate, Mr. Yang Dongi, has given over 700 lectures to teachers about the *chavrusa* method, and has spoken to more than 30,000 teachers about using it as an educational tool for all secular studies.

Mr. Kim gave me two books he has authored in Korean on the Talmud. He showed me the cover of one and translated it for me: “The

Secrets of the Talmud the Jews Don’t Want to Share.” And in big letters below, it said: “Business success.”

Are millions of people learning the Talmud in Korea? Absolutely not. Is there an appreciation and an understanding of the value of the Talmud and the great advantage of *chavrusa* learning? Unequivocally. Still, there’s nothing like learning a *sugya* the way we do. That is indeed the secret of the Talmud. ●



Mr. Kim is convinced that the Jewish edge on intelligence is because of Gemara and *chavrusa* study