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As Extent of Tragedy Emerges, Jews Pitch in for Tsunami Victims

By Rachel Pomerance and Peter Ephross

JTA email Edition

January 4, 2005

When it comes to helping victims of the Southeast Asian tsunami, the American Jewish World Service is taking the adage, teach a man how to fish quite literally.

As part of its long-term relief efforts for victims of the Dec. 26 tragedy, the group is working with partner organizations in the region, including the Sanghamitra Service Society in Andhra Pradesh, India, which helps local fishing communities with sustainable development and disaster preparedness. The philosophy behind the group's post-tsunami effort is the same as that behind general AJWS operations — long-term efforts through collaboration with groups in the region.

"We don't just go in and leave. We go in and we develop," said Ronni Strongin, a spokeswoman for AJWS, which already has raised more than \$2 million in online contributions for tsunami victims. The AJWS isn't alone in its approach: While not ignoring immediate needs, other Jewish groups also are planning aid that addresses the long-range needs of areas affected by the tsunami, which is believed to have claimed at least 130,000 lives. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee has raised more than \$1.7 million.

"Everybody comes in to provide emergency relief, and then they all leave and there's nobody left behind to help rebuild the infrastructure," said JDC's executive vice president, Steven Schwager. While a portion of our money will go for short-term emergency relief, a larger part of our money will go for infrastructure to leave something behind that the Jewish community can get credit for. That approach is likely to influence the Jewish Coalition for Disaster Relief, an umbrella of North American Jewish organizations, expected to convene next week at the JDC's request. The group provides a central address and decision-making process for disbursement of Jewish relief aid.

Until then, the JDC plans to allocate funds it has raised to local agencies on the ground like

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the International Rescue Committee in Indonesia. In India, it will send funds to the local Jewish community. Nearly 40 Jewish federations are soliciting for funds for the tsunami victims — UJA Federation of New York has raised some \$500,000 — and plan to donate the money directly to JDC, according to the United Jewish Communities, the coordinating body of the federation system. The JDC is an overseas partner of the federation system. Like other groups collecting relief money, Jewish organizations report that donors have responded quickly.

“The response has been very good,” said Kenneth Bandler, a spokesman for the American Jewish Committee, which has collected more than \$200,000 so far. For its part, the Union for Reform Judaism announced that it is donating \$100,000 to organizations helping tsunami victims. Further allocations from the union’s aid fund, which so far has taken in more than \$300,000, will be made in coming weeks, the union announced. Israel also is pitching in. The Israeli government sent aid to Thailand and Sri Lanka that included medicine, medical equipment, doctors, nurses and body bags. In addition, volunteers with Zaka, the Israeli organization that collects victims, body parts after terrorist attacks, have been identifying bodies in Thailand.

The aftermath of the disaster has allowed for a breakthrough of sorts for Israel’s chief relief agency. Magen David Adom officials have been involved in discussions with the International Red Cross on providing aid. That’s a first for the Israeli group, according to Daniel Allen, executive vice president of American Red Magen David for Israel, which raises funds for the Israeli group. The International Red Cross has excluded Magen David Adom from such discussions in the past, and has forced the Israeli group to wear different uniforms. But Magen David Adom intends to build a self-standing field clinic in the disaster zone, and this time its workers will be able to wear their uniforms, adorned with a red Jewish star, when they arrive in the region next week.

In addition to increased collaboration between the American Red Cross and its Israeli counterpart, and pressure by the American Red Cross on Israel’s behalf, “no one was going to deny anybody the opportunity to help,” Allen said. Hadassah, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America, also is soliciting funds to allow Hadassah medical staff in Israel to travel to the region to offer their services.

Chabad has provided a wealth of services in Thailand. Among its efforts, the local branch of Chabad paid for Zaka volunteers to come to the resort town of Phuket to identify both Jewish and non-Jewish victims, and the three Chabad Houses in Thailand have served as crisis centers for Israeli survivors of the disaster. On New Year’s Day, Chabad also sent five victims — four to Israel and one to Britain — home for burial.

Smaller Jewish institutions and individuals also are stepping up to the plate. Five children in New York City are raising money for the victims the old fashioned-way — through a bake sale. The children, aged 3-12, have raised close to \$500 by selling chocolate chip and sugar cookies. “We think that this will make them happy, and it makes us happy, too,” said Dassi Hirschfield, 10. The money raised through the bake sale is being given to the JDC and the AJWS.

The Rambam Mesivta yeshiva in Lawrence, N.Y., has raised nearly \$5,000 from students and parents in the past few days. Students were reminded of their obligation under Jewish

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law to help victims, and the group decided to give the money to Sri Lankan Airlines, which is helping child victims. According to the school principal, Rabbi Yotav Eliach, this approach puts a face behind the dollars and gives students a feeling of connection. "It's one thing when you get something from a large corporate entity," Eliach said. "It's another thing when you know you're getting it from kids." Eliach planned to bring a handful of class representatives Thursday to deliver the funds to the Sri Lankan ambassador in New York.

Some synagogues have included special commemorations for the victims. For example, the Jan. 1 Shabbat service at Manhattan's Park East synagogue brought together high-level diplomats from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Sweden, Indonesia, India and the United States. "The theme was we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and don't remain in it," Rabbi Arthur Schneier said. Schneier talked about the story of Noah — which recounts a biblical flood that destroyed civilization — and how the rainbow signaled the time when people would come together again. In Washington, Ohev Sholom Talmud Torah Congregation held a Jan. 1 prayer service attended by Ambassador H.K.J.R. Bandara of Sri Lanka and Reuven Azar, counselor of political affairs for the Israeli Embassy.

JDC Announces Initial Allocation of Funds to Support South Asia Tsunami Victims

JDC Newsletter

January 2005

One week has passed since a magnitude 9.0 earthquake off the coast of Indonesia spawned a series of tsunamis that have devastated coastal areas in South Asia from Thailand to India. The situation remains dire. The death toll has risen to more than 150,000 people; five million people remain homeless; close to two million people need food; and tens of thousands remain at high risk of contracting diseases such as cholera, typhoid and malaria. There have also been reports of widespread diarrhea, which is especially dangerous for children. A report from the World Health Organization has concluded that 50,000 additional deaths would be a reasonable projection.

Many relief agencies, including several Israeli organizations, have set up field operations in the region. Workers are delivering food, water, clothing, fuel, communications equipment, building materials and medical supplies. Despite their hard work, many obstacles exist. Some locales, such as parts of Indonesia and Sri Lanka, are nearly unreachable due to fuel shortages, washed-away highways and decimated civil infrastructure.

To support these efforts, on behalf of the North American Jewish Community, JDC has raised more than \$2 million through phone and Internet contributions. We have also shipped more than \$300,000 worth of medicine to India, which will be distributed by our partners on the ground. This morning we've announced the first in a series of monetary allocations to partner organizations on the ground that are providing near-term relief. We are also looking at longer-term infrastructure rebuilding projects, such as schools, hospitals, orphanages or medical clinics. We will be utilizing a portion of the monies we raise to support such projects, and we plan to announce which long-term projects we will be supporting at a later date.

This morning's allocations to JDC's partners include: International Rescue Committee. JDC is allocating \$150,000 for ongoing delivery of relief supplies in the hard-hit Aceh province of Indonesia. Disaster Mitigation Institute and Caritas/Catholic Relief. JDC is allocating a combined \$250,000 for delivery of food, clothing and temporary shelter materials in Chennai,

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India. JDC operates a field office in Mumbai, and will work with the local Jewish Community to coordinate activities in the field. Chabad. JDC is allocating \$25,000 to provide medical help, meals and clothing for injured survivors in Thailand. Chabad volunteers are working at hospitals, providing clothing and counseling services.

Additionally, JDC has dispatched a team of regional experts to Sri Lanka to determine which critical areas of need are not being serviced adequately and to select a partner agency on the ground with whom to work. Once this assessment is complete, we will make an immediate allocation of \$150,000 to support relief efforts in Sri Lanka.

For the latest Situation Report that provides more detailed information as well as an overview of JDC's Disaster Relief efforts over the past two decades, please click here http://www.jdc.org/news_press_010405.html. We will continue to provide you with updates as new information becomes available. Send checks to: JDC Southeast Asia Tsunami Relief, Box 321, 847A Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

The U.N's Politics of Humanitarianism

By Rachel Raskin-Zrihen

Jewish World Review

30, 2004 / 18 Teves, 5764

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com>

You're unlikely to learn this in the world's newspapers, but Israel was among the first nations to offer help to those affected by last week's terrible disaster in south Asia. It sent doctors, supplies and set aside \$100,000 for each nation hit by the recent tsunamis, according to reports in the Jewish Telegraph Agency (JTA). This wouldn't be such a big deal, except that reports of nations offering help released by the United Nations and printed in newspapers worldwide, don't include it. They do, however, include the donations several other countries whose contribution were as much or less. One report lists donations of personnel and material separately. Israel, which sent four top doctors from its Hadassah Hospital (including its head of general surgery and trauma, its chief of pediatrics and two anesthesiologists,) to Sri Lanka, the JTA reports, was not mentioned.

You may not know that the American Jewish World Service expected to send its first shipment of medicine Tuesday to Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India. The JTA reports the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is working with its office in Bombay and elsewhere to coordinate efforts to provide food, water, clothing and shelter to affected countries. B'nai B'rith is accepting donations to help victims, and an Orthodox outreach group in Thailand also responded to the crisis.

It dispatched a rabbi to Phuket to aid rescue efforts, and turned three of their Thailand outposts into crisis centers where survivors can call home, have a free meal or receive funds for new clothing and medical help.

You also might not learn, unless you searched the information out like I did, that there were perhaps 200 Jewish victims of the disaster still missing as of Tuesday, according to Israel's Foreign Ministry, which told the JTA that at least 33 Israelis are receiving treatment in hospitals in the region. I've read about the terrible losses suffered in this disaster by citizens of many other nations, but not a word about these people, which include a Belgian Jewish couple whose 11 month old son was reportedly ripped from their arms and drowned.

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In the same issue Tuesday, the JTA reported about a couple of Israeli scientists making a breakthrough in the treatment of AIDS, which follows closely on the heels of the two Israeli scientists recently awarded the Nobel Prize for their breakthrough in cancer treatment. But that's another story you're not likely to read much of in the mainstream press. Maybe I'm paranoid, but I can't think of an innocent explanation for the omission of Israel's contributions to this and other

humanitarian efforts worldwide by the UN and the world's main media outlets. I can't help feeling it's a not-so-subtle attempt to isolate Israel and the Jewish people from the world community, at least in print and therefore in public opinion, even while Israel and many Jews go about the business of behaving like human beings.

Not that they're doing what they do for recognition, but it's enormously frustrating that this keeps happening. For instance, did you know that Israel was the first country in the world, even before the United States, to conduct a national moment of silence for the 9/11 victims? This was done even as many Palestinians shouted, danced and handed out candy. Maybe you didn't know about that, either. The UN should just admit it despises the Jewish state and the Jewish people, has no intention of ever recognizing anything positive either ever does, and dispense with the pretense of fairness once and for all. But dispelling the myth that Israel in particular and Jews in general are the world's bad guys is imperative not just to combat growing worldwide anti-Semitism, but also for Jews who might, if they rely on the mainstream media for information, be starting to question themselves. Not to worry, though, the humanity of the people the former head of Malaysia recently accused of "inventing" human rights remains intact, no matter what you read or don't read in the paper.

African Shoah Lives in 'Hotel Rwanda'

By David Finnigan

The Jewish Journal of Los Angeles

December 24, 2004

When British actress Sophie Okonedo portrayed the wife of a hotel manager who saved more than 1,200 people during Rwanda's 1994 genocide, she worked with 10,000 extras — including Rwandan refugees living in Johannesburg. Some agreed to be in "Hotel Rwanda's" harrowing scene showing Rwandan women naked, caged and cowering, waiting to be raped. "Some of those women had been through that. You don't quite think about your film in the same way," said Okonedo, born in England to a Nigerian father and Jewish mother.

The two-hour, PG-13 film, which opened Wednesday in Los Angeles, tells the true story of Paul Rusesabagina, a Rwandan hotel manager who, in April 1994, sheltered 1,268 ethnic Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus marked for death by Hutu extremists. The extremists were responsible for the machete murders of almost 1 million Rwandans, a slaughter that world leaders ignored. A British-Italian-South African co-production, "Hotel Rwanda" earned a People's Choice Award at this year's Toronto International Film Festival, plus three Golden Globe nominations. It was screened earlier this fall at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Financing for the film's \$20 million production budget came partly from Israel's Bank Leumi, and one-third of the funds came from government financing in South Africa, where most of the film was shot.

As Rwanda's genocide progressed, the United Nations and the Clinton administration

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downplayed the genocide, dismissing news reports of mass slaughter and delaying the dispatch of troops to stop it. Unlike the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide was broadcast worldwide, and “Hotel Rwanda” has re-ignited decade-old feelings of shame among European and U.S. film patrons over how their nations refused to intervene. “We have seen this film before. It could have easily been Poland in 1940 with Jews,” said Rachel Jagoda, the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust director who saw an advance screening of the film. “The faces, the ethnicities, the landscape change, but the story is the same.”

“The biggest difference, of course, is the rate at which the genocide occurred,” Jagoda said. “It took 12 years to murder 6 million Jews in Europe. It took 100 days to murder almost 1 million people in Rwanda.” Okonedo agreed, saying, “It wouldn’t have taken very much to stop the genocide. These people were slaughtered with machetes.” Character actor Don Cheadle plays Rusesabagina, a moderate Hutu whose compassion turns the elegant, Belgian-owned Hotel des Milles Collines into a rare Tutsi haven. His performance earned him a Golden Globe best actor nomination, alongside nominations for best dramatic picture and original song.

“Hotel Rwanda” executive producer Hal Sadoff, whose great-grandparents fled Ukrainian anti-Semitism, worked on the film’s financing with fellow executive producer Martin Katz, a Jewish Canadian. “It’s a topic that has not really been publicized in the U.S.; people are ready today to look at it,” said Sadoff, who also handled financing for “House of Sand and Fog.” “There are a lot of Holocaust scripts around. But this script — it was so well written and so commercial and although it was set within this horrible tragedy — it was really about human relationships.”

Known to independent film audiences for her role in 2002’s “Dirty Pretty Things,” Okonedo’s prominent “Hotel Rwanda” part as Rusesabagina’s wife, Tatiana, is key. Her simple desire to save her family gives filmgoers a way to comprehend the seemingly superhuman compassion of her otherwise ordinary husband. “The biggest leap for me was to become a Rwandan housewife, because it was completely opposite my upbringing,” Okonedo told *The Journal* in a telephone interview. The real Paul Rusesabagina fled Rwanda with his wife, three children and two nieces and resettled in Belgium, where he runs a trucking company and served as the film’s consultant.

Okonedo, who researched her role at the Berlin Holocaust Museum, said meeting the couple was “quite overwhelming at first, and it was quite frightening. He’s almost a kind of an accidental hero. These people were still living and getting on with their lives. It’s always extraordinary when you see survivors.” Despite the horrific subject matter, the film’s singular focus is on Rusesabagina, an ordinary hotel manager, trying to protect his family and 1,200-plus people. Because of this emphasis, Okonedo finished the film with some hope. “These people, Paul and Tatiana, they just kept going through all this mayhem, and they didn’t fall apart,” she said. “So many of the films at the moment are about superpeople, superlawyers, superdetectives and spies. I’m just quite interested in the ordinary Joe, and the ordinary often has extraordinary tales to tell.”

Top Rabbis and Imams Meet as Partners for Peace

**The Telegraph London
January 4, 2005**

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Muslim and Jewish leaders from across the world were set to gather in Brussels last night in an effort to quell rising tensions between Muslims and Jews in Europe. High on the agenda was a call from a senior Muslim figure in Britain for a policy of "naming and shaming" of extremists. The "imams and rabbis for peace" conference, which brings together 150 leaders of the two faiths, was set up by the Paris-based peace foundation Hommes de Parole (Men of Their Word).

The chief rabbis of Austria, Brussels, Bulgaria and Denmark were among Jewish religious leaders to take part, while a strong contingent from Israel was to include the chief rabbi of Haifa and prominent members of the High Rabbinical Court of Jerusalem. Abduljalil Sajid, a senior figure in the Muslim Council of Britain who called for the naming and shaming policy, said he hoped the conference would demonstrate that "99.9 per cent of Muslims, along with 99.9 per cent of Jews" favoured peaceful co-existence. Dr Sajid, the imam of Brighton, was to chair a session in which imams and rabbis would study values common to both religions.

He said: "We should stand shoulder to shoulder to name and shame the tiny minority of agitators and extremists within our own communities and stress our respect for the sanctity of life." Dr Sajid said he had encountered the militant north London cleric Abu Hamza in the late 1980s, before Hamza went to fight with the mujahideen in Afghanistan, and became concerned about his views. "Hamza was staying at our mosque while studying in Brighton," he said. "When you see someone day in, day out, you quickly see what they are like. I alerted the authorities but no one would listen because he had not actually done anything."

Dr Sajid said the views of mainstream religious leaders were not heard. "That leaves a tiny minority of troublemakers to dominate headlines and cause scaremongering coverage that frightens people." He said he was prepared to meet "obnoxious people" and confront their views. "We have to start somewhere," he said. Organisers say they are seeking to "create dialogue and an enduring partnership between Islam and Judaism", promoting personal friendships and joint initiatives. Joseph Sitruk, the chief rabbi of France, said: "The assembly is an important moment because it carries hope and freedom for a disillusioned world."

Israel's Military Reaches Out to Minority Groups

In a partnership with universities, the army educates Ethiopians and other immigrants so they can become skilled professionals

By Haim Watzman

The Chronicle of Higher Education

December 10, 2004

As a top high-school student in the Israeli port city of Ashdod, Sally Benson was sure she had overcome the obstacles that have kept the vast majority of Israel's Ethiopian Jews from pursuing a university degree, including poverty and low levels of education. The petite, self-assured Ms. Benson, the penultimate child among 12, is now in her second year in industrial engineering and management at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, in Haifa. But she admits that she could never have gotten this far without the help two years ago of a collegepreparatory course that she initially dismissed as unnecessary. The course is part of a program sponsored by Israel's army that takes young people from disadvantaged ethnic

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and social groups and turns them into the top-flight professionals that the military needs. "I thought it would be easy," Ms. Benson says, laughing. "It wasn't easy at all."

She wasn't the only one struggling. The program, Atidim, or Futures, got off to a rough start. Nearly half the students enrolled during its first year, in 2002, failed the preparatory course. But the army and the two universities that are working together on it learned from their mistakes and persisted. This year the program is smaller and more selective, but teachers, administrators, and students are optimistic about its future. Atidim's birth pangs, and the way it has overcome them, provides a lesson for those seeking to increase college enrollments and graduation rates among disadvantaged minorities.

Atidim was founded on the premise that there was untapped potential in the country's Ethiopian, Druze, and Bedouin ethnic groups, as well as among Jews living in the disadvantaged towns and farming villages in Israel's peripheral regions. The army was running short of professionals -- primarily engineers, but also lawyers, doctors, and economists -- because its Atuda corps, a prestigious program similar to the U.S. Army's Reserve Officer Training Corps, was no longer attracting enough top-quality high-school graduates willing to sign up for a seven-year commitment. The army needs the country's top high-school students to staff its sophisticated research-and-development projects. But the incentives the army offers -- a free college education and top-notch work experience -- are not as attractive as they once were, says Lt. Col. Itzik Maya, the director of Atidim, at the program's office in a high-security army technical installation.

Teenagers with the highest marks and test scores tend to come from middle-class neighborhoods in the big cities of the country's central region. Their parents can afford to pay college tuition, and high-tech firms are willing to offer them high-paying jobs right out of college, he notes. To search for replacements for such students in the Ethiopian and other disadvantaged communities was a radical idea, Colonel Maya says. While many of Israel's minority groups suffer from poverty, discrimination, and a lack of positive role models, the plight of the Ethiopians is arguably the worst. Facing oppression and poverty at home, about 35,000 Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s. A great majority of them came from backward, rural regions where anything beyond a grade-school education was exceptional. "Most of the parents don't work; there are a large number of single-parent families and a large number of children," says Liat Mayberg, director of the Preacademic Program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. As the newest of the country's disadvantaged groups, Ethiopians have not yet begun to move up the socioeconomic ladder, and there are few successful, educated members of the community to inspire its young people, she notes.

But Colonel Maya and other army officers noticed that, while relatively small numbers of Ethiopians and other minority groups were qualified for Atuda, they were increasingly well represented in the army's combat-officer corps. This indicated, he says, that there were talents in those communities waiting to be tapped. With the right support, army planners reasoned, young Ethiopians, Druze, Bedouin, and Jews from outlying regions could successfully complete university studies at a high level and answer the army's needs. At first, Atidim sought to identify high-school students from these groups who exhibited high potential and, with some guidance and help in high school, steer them toward Atuda, Colonel Maya says. But success was limited, especially among Ethiopians. It soon became clear that most Ethiopians -- and many members of the other groups -- who were at the top of their high-

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school classes were still not capable of successfully completing a high-level undergraduate program in engineering or the other fields that interested the army.

High Failure Rate

So, three years ago, Atidim joined forces with the college-preparatory program at the Technion. That long-established course provides a year of remedial study to promising young people with potential who nevertheless need to improve grades, test scores, and study skills to be accepted into the Technion or another Israeli university. The preparatory program serves, for the most part, young people who have completed their military service. It opened special classes for students accepted into Atidim, who were just out of high school. Because of their special needs, Ethiopian enrollees were placed in a separate class. A year later the Hebrew University opened a parallel class. The first Atidim cohort for Ethiopians entered the Technion's preparatory program in the fall of 2002 with 40 students, but only 23 made it to the end of the year. Of those who completed the course, 3 were unable to find university placements and 10 ended up in second-tier college engineering programs.

The following year, when the Hebrew University accepted its first Ethiopian Atidim class, only 29 out of 48 completed the program. "They weren't mature enough to understand what was being expected of them," says Sharon Liberty, a counselor for the Hebrew University preparatory program who works with Ethiopian students. "It's a very demanding year, and by the time they realized what they had to do, their studies had ended." "When they saw that the studies were difficult, instead of putting out additional effort, they began to skip classes and not get up in the morning," Ms. Mayberg adds. Teachers in the program also found that the students lacked basic knowledge that they expected a high-school graduate to have. "Forty percent of them couldn't name the continents and couldn't fill in a map of the local geography of the Middle East," says Heidi Rabinovitch, an English teacher in the program.

The students received courses in study skills and individual tutoring, but it wasn't enough. The major problem, Ms. Mayberg believes, was not lack of sufficient support but faulty selection. In Hebrew University's first year with Atidim, Ms. Mayberg says, the army exerted pressure to accept students who came highly recommended by high-school principals, but whose scores on Israel's national high-school-graduation examinations, and on the standardized college admissions test, were well below the usual minimum required by the preparatory program. Many of the students came from public boarding schools that take students primarily from disadvantaged areas and from poor, large families, often immigrants, in which the parents have difficulty supporting and educating their children. While the students from those institutions who applied to Atidim had been at the top of their classes, the level of the education at the schools was inferior even to city high schools in Israel's peripheral regions. Furthermore, many boarding-school graduates had not developed good study skills, say Ms. Mayberg and her counterpart at the Technion, Muli Dotan.

The army's Atidim staff hoped that with enough extra help and some motivation, even students who were below par in their grades and test scores could get into college. But Colonel Maya acknowledges that the selection was counterproductive. "It makes no sense to take an unqualified student," he says. "Last year I went to battle with the preparatory programs to take these students, but it was a mistake. If a student like that ends up failing, it can be a very negative experience."

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More Selective

This year's applicants were required to take a standardized test, and those at the Technion also had to take the admissions test that is standard for applicants to that institution. Low-scoring students were not admitted. The result is that fewer students made the grade, but those who did were more likely to succeed. Notably, most of them were top-performing students at their neighborhood high schools, rather than at boarding schools. Nearly all of them attribute their success to the importance that their parents attached to education. "My parents didn't go to high school in Ethiopia, just elementary school, but they were always pushing me to study," says Yalpal Siyum, who is from the town of Mazkeret Batya and is one of eight children. The program also now provides personal tutors, extra counseling, and more emphasis on learning how to study. One of this year's students, Moshe Desalin, from the town of Karmiel in the Galilee, says he understands why so many of last year's students failed to complete the precollege program. "It's not like high school, and I think that by the time they realized that, it was too late," he says.

Even though he had been a top high-school student, Mr. Desalin, who is at Hebrew University, appreciated the help he received in a six-week summer orientation session that preceded the precollege course itself. "They gave us guided study, showed us how to organize our material," he explains. Since he had gotten through high school without needing to prepare much for exams, he had never learned to take and organize notes, nor to pace himself in going over course material so that he would not face an impossible task at the end of the term, he says. Ms. Rabinovitch, the English teacher, feels that this year's students are far more likely to succeed than those she taught last year, but they still have much to learn. In her experience, Ethiopian students are particularly poor at time management, so one of the major tasks of the year is to teach them how to use their time well.

"I didn't overload them with homework, but they'd come into class very sleepy and tell me they'd been up to 3 a.m. with their books," she related. "They didn't understand that they couldn't stay up all night." It is notable that, despite the program's rocky start, many of this year's students are the siblings, cousins, or neighbors of students who went through the program in previous years. Colonel Maya points to this as evidence that Atidim is already succeeding in one of its goals: changing perceptions in the Ethiopian-Israeli community so that both teenagers and their parents see college as an option. Colonel Maya says that students, including Ethiopians, from an earlier stage in the program have already completed their studies and have been grabbed by some of the army's most elite technical units. However, these are a handful of top high-school students whom Atidim identified and supported, but not ones who needed a precollege program. It will be three or four years before the first Ethiopian students who went through the precollege course reach the point when they must apply for army postings.

One of the first to reach that point will be Ms. Benson, whose first year of undergraduate studies extended into the summer. She had to retake a couple of her exams in order to move up to the second year. She is working very, very hard, she says, harder than she ever thought she would have to. But she has no doubts that she will graduate. Mr. Dotan, the Technion program director, agrees. Colonel Maya says that Atidim's goal is to produce 40,000 college graduates Ethiopians and other minority groups by the year 2020. If it succeeds, Israel's universities, army, and society will have a very different look to them.

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The author served in the Israeli infantry from 1982 to 1984, and in the infantry reserves until 2002.

Knesset Urges Raising Quota for Ethiopian Jews

By Nathaniel Popper

December 31, 2004

The Forward

Sent By: Michelle Stein-Evers Frankl

Thousands of Ethiopians, languishing in two compounds, have won critical political support for their bid to immigrate to Israel. Half the members of Knesset are calling on the Israeli government to abolish, or at least significantly raise, its monthly quota on the number of Falash Mura that are allowed to come to Israel. The call was contained in a December 16 letter, signed by 61 of 120 Knesset members, to Prime Minister Sharon. The letter referred to the plight of the estimated 17,000 Ethiopians living as urban refugees near two compounds in Addis Ababa and Gondar. Known as Falash Mura, these would-be immigrants to Israel are Jews who underwent some type of conversion to Christianity or the descendents of such people. In recent years they have declared a desire to return to the Jewish fold and have adopted Orthodox Jewish lifestyles while waiting for permission to come to Israel. Currently only 300 Falash Mura are allowed into Israel each month, and even fewer have been able to come in recent months. The Israeli lawmakers urged that the monthly quota be raised to 1,000, or eliminated. A day after the Knesset letter, two American congressmen wrote a similar letter to Sharon calling for an acceleration in the rate of Falash Mura immigration.

The more influential, and, some observers say, surprising support for increasing the quota has come from the Jewish Agency, the quasi-governmental organization responsible for immigration to Israel. The agency has not historically supported the immigration of the Falash Mura, but in recent months the agency's chairman, Sallai Meridor, has campaigned aggressively to raise the quota to at least 600. The long-running debate over the Falash Mura was thought to be resolved in February 2003, when the Israeli cabinet granted most Falash Mura the right to come to Israel. Since then, however, government ministers in crucial ministries have argued that Israel's economic situation does not allow it to absorb more immigrants. The new political support might shift the tide. "All the years, we struggled alone," said Avraham Neguise, director of the South Wing of Zion, the main group in Israel lobbying for the Falash Mura. "The Jewish Agency and these organizations were all on the other side. Now they understand our side. I am optimistic that the suffering of my community may be near an end." Pro-Falash Mura activists are particularly encouraged right now because of the departure from the government of the Shinui Party, which had been among the strongest opponents to letting more Falash Mura into Israel. The formation of the new Israeli government, though, has caused a postponement of a planned meeting December 26 between Prime Minister Sharon and Meridor, at which the quota issue was set to be resolved.

Most of the Ethiopians waiting to immigrate to Israel had ancestors who converted from Judaism to Christianity often under duress from Ethiopia's Coptic Christian regime. Those who are currently waiting are different than the mass of Ethiopians who came to Israel in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, who never converted to Christianity. The Judaism of the remaining Falash Mura has been a matter of fierce debate in Israeli society. But the practical

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side of the dispute whether the Falash Mura had a right to immigrate was put to rest at an Israeli Cabinet meeting February 16, 2003. The Cabinet decided then that any Ethiopian who can trace a maternal connection to Judaism, no matter how many generations back, could come to Israel under the law of entry.

The postponed meeting between Meridor and Sharon was provoked by an Israel court case in which 400 Falash Mura in Ethiopia are suing the government for entry. In court proceedings, the government has said that most of the Falash Mura in Ethiopia should meet the maternal criteria, but this did not convince some of the most crucial government ministers, including Shinui member Avraham Poraz, who was minister of the Interior until earlier this month. Poraz, whose ministry was responsible for certifying the immigrants, fought any rise in the quota. He argued that Israel cannot afford to absorb the Ethiopians, who require more resources than do other immigrants to Israel. A spokesperson for Tzipi Livni, minister of Immigrant Absorption, told the Forward that the budget for 2005 contains only enough money for bringing 300 Falash Mura each month.

Currently, though, a joint Knesset committee has been looking at ways to find money to raise the quota, and a spokesman for Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told the Forward that Netanyahu is not opposed to raising the monthly quota of the Falash Mura. Supporters of the Falash Mura have criticized harshly the debate over financial sums, arguing that no other immigrant group has been curtailed because of economic concerns. Until slightly more than a year ago, the Falash Mura received little help from the agency that is actually responsible for bringing them to Israel, the Jewish Agency. The agency was one of many organizations that began to shift after last February's Cabinet decision, and a statement by the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel last summer, that the Falash Mura are "completely Jewish without any doubt." In late November, Meridor released a statement declaring: "It is not right to hamper the pace of immigration from any country in the world; this is the only case of this happening in the history of the State of Israel." Jewish federations are also advocating the Falash Mura cause.

Aliya of the East Wind

By Wendy Elliman

Hadassah Magazine

January 2005 Vol. 86 No. 5

Jewish remnants can be found in every corner of the world. Here is a story about those whose thousand-year journey was made in China.

Shi Lei's family name is Mandarin Chinese for stone, and he's thinking of choosing Evven (Hebrew for stone) as his family name in Israel. He has not yet decided what to do about his first name, Lei, which means integrity—but then it is in Shi that his identity and history are cradled. According to a story handed down for over a thousand years among the Jews of Kaifeng, a Chinese emperor wearied of twisting his tongue around the outlandish names of his Jewish subjects and imposed on them his own family name and the names of six of his ministers. The descendants of those seven families from Song Dynasty times still bear these names: Shi, Zhao, Li, Ai, Zhang, Gao and Jin.

"I've known I'm Jewish for as long as I can remember," asserts Shi Lei (pronounced Sherr-Lay), who was born in Kaifeng 26 years ago and whose skin, hair, features and build are

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classically Chinese. “I heard it from my father and my grandfather since I was a child. It’s part of who I am. But no, I didn’t know any more than that. I didn’t know Jewish history or thought, Jewish laws, customs or traditions. I’d never heard of Seder night or Yom Kippur or opened a *Tanakh*. I knew only that I’m a Jew.” Shi Lei is one of an estimated 300 descendants of the ancient Jewish community of Kaifeng who stubbornly cling to their Jewish identity; their last rabbi died 150 years ago, Jewish knowledge has dissipated and the once close-knit group (that dates back to the 11th century) has disintegrated into isolated families. The passion of the emotional bond, however, persists. In July 2000, when a visiting American rabbi whom Shi Lei had met only days before suggested he spend a year in Israel studying his heritage, the young man’s answer was an instantaneous “Yes.”

“I was leading a group of American Jews on a study tour of Jewish communities in Japan and China,” says Rabbi Marvin Tokayer, chief rabbi of Tokyo for many years before retiring to Great Neck, New York. “Shi Lei, a college graduate with fluent English, had been referred to us as our Kaifeng guide. From the first evening we met, he had question after question about Judaism, Jewish history and his ancestry. I asked if he’d be willing to spend a year in Israel...studying Judaism and learning Hebrew. Not only he but also his father agreed at once, tears blurring their eyes.” Shi Lei left shortly afterward—traveling 15 hours by rail from Kaifeng, on the south bank of China’s Yellow River, to Beijing and from there a further 14 hours by air to Tel Aviv. “I wasn’t afraid to go so far,” he says. “Israel is the land of my ancestors. I was going home.”

Shi Lei, who followed his one-year Jewish studies program at Bar-Ilan University with two years at the Machon Meir Yeshiva in Jerusalem and now wears a *kippa*, is not the only Kaifeng Jewish descendant to come home. Four years ago, Jin Guang-Yuan; his wife, Zhan Jin Ling; and their daughter, Jin Wen-Jing, made a similar journey. “There were people helping Jews from Russia go to Israel,” says Jin Guang-Yuan, 48, a former furnace foreman who now calls himself Shlomo. “They decided to look for Chinese Jews who wanted to go home as well. They came to Kaifeng. When they asked me if I wanted to go to Israel, I said, ‘Of course.’ I’m Jewish. Even my Chinese papers list me as *Youtai* [Jew]. I’d always wanted to live in Israel. In Kaifeng, there is no Shabbat and we are not allowed to pray as Jews.”

In an article in *Judaism* (Winter 2000), Irwin M. Berg explains that “It would be dangerous for the descendants to exhibit a commitment to the Jewish religion.... The Chinese government does not recognize the existence of Jews as a protected religious minority, although it welcomes the tourism their presence generates. The government would be especially vigilant to oppose a religious movement with foreign support.” The decision to leave Kaifeng was harder for Shlomo’s wife, Zhan Jin Ling, 45, who is not Jewish but Han (ethnic Chinese). “Of course I knew Guang-Yuan was descended from Jews,” she says. “Even before we married I knew that. It didn’t matter to me. But I hesitated when he said we should move to Israel. I agreed to go in order to keep our family together.”

When the family came to Israel, Jin Wen-Jing, then 16, was enrolled at Yemin Orde, a Youth Aliyah school near Haifa. This past June she not only received a matriculation certificate to enter university but also appeared before a Haifa Jewish court, which approved her conversion to Judaism. Taking the Hebrew name Shalva (Serenity), a translation of Wen-Jing, the teen is the first descendant of the ancient Kaifeng Jewish community to return formally to Judaism. “I didn’t want to go through conversion because I’ve always thought of myself as Jewish,” she says in faintly accented Hebrew. “But according to *halakha* I had no choice. God chose the Jewish people to be His nation, and I wanted to be accepted as part

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of it.”

Kaifeng Jewish descendants know from their family names and traditions that an unbroken Jewish line on their paternal side stretches back about a thousand years; a group of Persian Jews traveled the legendary Silk Road to the bustling metropolis of Kaifeng, capital of the ruling Song Dynasty, and what proved to be a welcome home. Brought before the emperor, the travelers offered him cotton goods. He accepted the tribute, saying, “You have come to our China. Respect and preserve the customs of your ancestors and hand them down.” And hand them down they did, but in the Chinese style, where personal status is patrilineal. With wives adopting the faith of their husbands, the men were permitted to marry outside the faith.

“The importance of ancestry...is key to Jewish survival in Kaifeng,” explains Tokayer. “Unfortunately, however, there is a halakhic problem. In Jewish law, personal status is matrilineal. However clear the Jewish origins of the Kaifeng community and however strongly Kaifeng’s Jewish descendants feel their Jewishness, they are not recognized as Jews under Jewish law.” The halakhic difficulty is neither insurmountable nor unprecedented, according to Michael Freund, director of Shavei Israel (Returnees to Israel), a newly founded organization that reaches out to those with Jewish ancestry who want to reclaim their Jewishness. “Returning Jews aren’t a new phenomenon,” says Freund. “There have always been persecutions and forcible conversions and Jews torn away from their faith. Over the years, procedures have been developed for those who want to return.”

He cites the Marranos who arrived in 16th-century Amsterdam 150 years after the height of the Spanish Inquisition, asking to reclaim their Jewishness. “A halakhic mechanism was created to receive them,” he says. “We’re currently researching Jewish sources and halakhic approaches for a model to be used today for this ‘seed of Israel,’ which includes not only the Kaifeng Jewish descendants but also Crypto-Jews from Spain, Portugal and South America and the apparent descendants of the Lost Tribes. Our aim is that when someone of Jewish descent wants to return, there’s both room for them and halakhic leniency in the conversion process.”

For example, with certain communities that have moved to modern Israel whose Judaism is in doubt and a formal conversion required, the length of time mandated for learning about Judaism (usually two to three years) is much reduced prior to their appearance before a *beit din* and immersion in a *mikve*.

Shavei Israel continues the work of the veteran Amishav, an organization with similar aims that fought rabbinical suspicion when it was first founded 30 years ago by Rabbi Eliyahu Avihail in Jerusalem. It was through Amishav, then functioning out of Avihail’s apartment before it moved to Jerusalem’s Chief Rabbinate building, that Freund first met Shi Lei. “I’d just finished a novel about the Kaifeng Jewish community—*Peony* by Pearl S. Buck,” he says. “And suddenly there was Shi Lei, looking as if he’d stepped straight out of its pages.”

That meeting led to growing Amishav involvement with the Kaifeng descendants. First that organization and now Shavei Israel are helping guide the Jins toward conversion through Israel’s difficult-to-navigate bureaucracy. Avihail translated his summary of Jewish philosophy and practice into Mandarin and plans to furnish a Jewish library at Nanjing University. He also hopes to create a college scholarship and Jewish-studies program in China for economically struggling Jewish descendants and help them come to Israel to study. The Kaifeng community, staggering under repeated natural, military and economic

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catastrophes and weakened by intermarriage and acculturation, appealed to world Jewry early last century to help them survive as Jews. Overwhelmed by the refugee crisis of World War I, however, their plea went unheeded. “Now that we have a chance to remedy the past, we must do so and do so on the terms of the people we’re helping,” says Freund. “Maybe the majority aren’t interested in converting. Maybe all they want is knowledge about the ancestry they’ve honored against great odds.”

This, of course, is the key question. Is there a Jewish awakening, a religious spark waiting to be rekindled, or is the yearning for knowledge no more than curiosity? Xu Xin, president of Nanjing University’s School of Foreign Studies and professor of the history of Jewish culture, has no doubt. A former Cultural Revolution Red Guard who is an expert on Jewish literature and the Kaifeng Jewish community, he lists the factors he believes prove a Jewish awakening.

“First, Jewish tradition has always remained strong among the Kaifeng Jewish descendants,” he says. “Second, China’s new open-door policy has enabled Jews from the outside to visit them. Some have brought or sent Jewish religious articles and Chinese-language books about Judaism. Others have performed Friday night and Sabbath morning services for the Kaifeng Jewish descendants. All this has generated new Jewish interest among them. Third, the descendants now have greater opportunity to learn about Jews and Jewish history, which gives them increased reason to return to their traditions. Fourth, an increasing number of Chinese scholars are writing about Judaism and studying the Kaifeng Jews, making the descendants more keenly aware of their past.”

Finally, Xu Xin says, the descendants themselves are becoming more active and initiating contacts with other descendants inside Kaifeng and with Jews from outside.

Freund, however, sounds a note of caution. “It’s easy to get swept away by the drama of the Kaifeng story,” he says. “As yet there’s no clear evidence of a general awakening.” A Jewish community that at its peak (under the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644) numbered some 5,000, has dwindled to no more than a few hundred. In 1988, in the last Chinese census in which Jews were allowed to identify themselves as Jews, there were 700 to 1,000 *Youtai* in Kaifeng. (Thereafter, concerned the descendants would seek privileges accorded to recognized minorities, the Chinese government changed their official identity from *Youtai Houdai*, Jewish descendants, to Han.) An unofficial survey 10 years later found only 300 self-declared *Youtai*. These figures, however, are not reliable. Some Jews identify themselves as Muslim to circumvent the one-child-per-family ruling (unlike the Jews, Muslims are a recognized minority); others prefer calling themselves Han rather than show commitment to Judaism. While there are no recorded incidents of anti-Semitism in China, ancient or modern, the Chinese government does not welcome religious movements that have foreign support.

Do Shi Lei and the Jin family see themselves as exceptional in their return to Judaism? “No, there are many like us,” says Shlomo Jin. “Once they see me get Israeli citizenship, others will follow.” “It’s hard for them to come to Israel and study like I did, because the Kaifeng Jewish descendants have very little money,” says Shi Lei. “But the desire is there.” Shi Lei and the Jin family are optimistic about an influx of Kaifeng Jews. With his fluent Chinese and English, Shi Lei hopes to help them find a voice in the Jewish world. Shalva Jin, who speaks Chinese and Hebrew and has navigated her way through four years of Israeli high school, also sees herself helping Kaifeng’s Jews settle into Israel. As far as they’re concerned, their millennium in China was simply an extended stay away from the land that is their true home.

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A Conversation with Julia Schulman, Mother of Two Daughters Adopted from China**By Charlotte Honigman-Smith****InterfaithFamily.com**

Julia Schulman, a high school art teacher in San Francisco, spoke to Charlotte Honigman-Smith about her experiences raising two Jewish Chinese-American daughters.

CHS: This website is called *InterfaithFamily.com*, and the theme for the issue is raising Asian-Jewish children in an adoptive family who were born into a different faith background.

JS: I don't know what my daughters' faith background is. For all I know, they could be long-lost Jews! In China there are many different religions.

What I'm trying to do is combine their racial heritage, which is Chinese, with my cultural and religious heritage, which is Judaism. I don't see any contradiction in that. I think of it as an added bonus, because they get two instead of one. Jews aren't necessarily of one race. There are black Jews and Chinese Jews and Filipino Jews, Latino Jews. I am trying to support their birth heritage, their birth race, as well as making them a part of who I am.

CHS: So you have two daughters, Lila and Eden. Where were they born?

JS: Both of them were born in China. Lila was born in southern China, and Eden was born in Central China.

CHS: How old are they, and when did they become part of your family?

JS: Lila is just five now, and she was adopted at nine months old, on September 3, 2000. Eden was adopted at thirteen months, on July 26, 2004, and she's seventeen months old now.

CHS: I was wondering if you could talk a little about how you're making a Jewish home, what sort of Jewish things there are in the home that you do.

JS: Lila came home from school the other day complaining that she was the only Jewish child in her class. She said "They do Christmas, I do Hanukkah." We light candles every Friday night. I sing songs with them, I send Lila to Hebrew school. We do Passover and Rosh Hashanah and all the holidays. They're raised as I would raise any biological child. We exist as a Jewish family.

CHS: Are there ways in which you're marking, or honoring, their birth culture?

JS: Their Hebrew names reflect their Chinese names. Lila's Chinese name, given to her by the orphanage director is Qiu Lan. It means Autumn Orchid. Lila's Hebrew name is Lila Stav: Autumn Night, so I incorporated part of her Chinese name (Autumn) into her Hebrew name.

Eden's Chinese name, also given to her by her orphanage, is Yuan Li. It means Wondrous Beauty. Her Hebrew name is Eden Yafit, Beautiful Eden. So I incorporated the Beauty part of her Chinese name into her Hebrew name as well. Lila knows she's Chinese. We go to Chinatown for the New Years. Our home is filled with stuff from China. We have Chinese

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pictures all over our house. When she is dressed up, it's in Chinese dresses. One thing that was missing for Lila was books that have Chinese heroines and Chinese characters, or Asian characters, so when I went to China to adopt my second child I went and I bought about thirty books! So, the stories I read her every night are stories from China, with Chinese characters. We are a biracial family, we're a multiracial family, and that's infused for them.

CHS: Have you felt comfortable within the Jewish community as a multiracial family?

JS: Yes. I think there are a lot of multiracial Jewish families. I do get questions--not necessarily from Jews, but questions asked of people who are adoptive parents can be a little intrusive. They'll say in front of the girls, "Are they sisters?" or, "Are they real sisters?" It's almost as though they don't understand that my kids are listening to everything they are saying. And yes, they are real sisters, because your adopted family is your real family. What they mean to say is, are they biological sisters? But I don't think that's their business. But these are the kind of questions I get everywhere, not just the Jewish community.

CHS: And I imagine it gets more extreme when it's evident that the kid must be adopted.

JS: Yes. Then you get the questions from the stranger. One question you should be asked as an interfaith family is how do you include her as an adopted child, how do you deal with that aspect in a natural and positive way? That's the biggest challenge. Not just sending her to Chinese camps, but sending her to heritage camps that are mostly attended by other adopted children. And having friends who are also parents of girls from China. Then when she says, "Am I the only adopted child," I can say, "No, this girl is and this girl is, and your friend is one," and she says, "Oh, I'm part of a community here. They're from the same type of family."

CHS: Anything else we ought to know? I think we've covered what I want to ask about, which was primarily how you go about raising them Chinese, raising them Jewish.

JS: Raising them to be them. My older daughter's Jewish identity is very strong. It was funny; when I converted Lila everybody was almost shocked. It seemed very odd to people that this was going to be a Chinese Jewish child. And yet it seemed much less odd that the other members of the group that traveled with me were baptizing their kids and making them members of their church communities. For some reason people really balked at that Jewish thing, like "How can you make a Chinese kid Jewish?" Well, you convert them! And then you raise them Jewish! That's what I am. My family is a Jewish family.

CHS: Do you think it has to do with the fact that Jewish is an ethnicity as well as a religion?

JS: I think the issue is that being a Christian is different from being a Jew. That being a Jew is also part of your ethnic and cultural identity, not just a religion. Lila's a member of two hugely strong ethnic groups, Chinese and Jewish. But it did seem very strange to people that I was going to raise her Jewish. I remember my friend's husband said, "Are you going to raise her Buddhist?" I'm not Buddhist, how am I going to do that? And her biological parents weren't necessarily Buddhists. That's assuming that all Chinese are one thing or another, when they are not. It doesn't work that way. I was a little taken aback by that.

CHS: How did the conversion go, other than that?

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JS: It was lovely. The first one was pretty standard, I dunked Lila. For the second one, Eden's, I couldn't go into the mikvah (ritual bath) for female reasons. It turned out I could have, but the woman who was at the synagogue said that I couldn't. Of course, as part of the conversion, the whole body has to have immersion in water. So there's a point where you've got to let the kid go, underneath the water for at least a second, you know?

There was a woman being converted the same day, and I had called her up earlier and asked if she could dunk Eden. She said she'd do it, and I said, "This would be your first mitzvah (commanded good deed) as a new Jew! To make another one." She sounded really nice over the phone, and then they got there, and she was Asian. She was Vietnamese. And I thought, that's kind of a nice thing, two Asian Jews being made at once, within five minutes. She did the mikvah, and after everything was done, she brought my child in, as a new Jew, into the mikvah.

Both times, I did the conversion almost immediately on returning from the trip to China,. I felt as though to make them truly a part of my family, I had to make them Jewish. When I came back with Eden I took her to the doctor for blood tests and a checkup, but then, after the mikvah, I felt like, okay, I did her inside and out now. She's mine. She's whole and healthy and what she's supposed to be inside and out. A healthy Jew! They both wore their Chinese clothes for the conversion. I have pictures of it, with them both dressed very nicely in their Chinese outfits, for their conversions. And Eden wore the same outfit to her conversion that Lila wore to hers.

CHS: Have you run into any problems being a single parent of your daughters?

JS: I have had nothing but support from the community. During the conversion, when they ask for the Hebrew name, it is supposed to be the name of the child, plus "bat (or ben)" and the Hebrew name of the father. For single moms, they put on the document: Bat Avraham. So, my daughters' names are: Lila Stav Bat Avraham, and Eden Yafit Bat Avraham. (They can also just use my Hebrew name, Yael, for Lila Stav Bat Yael).

Charlotte Green Honigman-Smith is a writer and Jewish activist living in San Francisco. She is the editor of *Maydeleh: a zine for nice Jewish grrrls*, and of *JewishAnd*, an anthology of writing by Jewish women from mixed families. In her spare time, she teaches high school English. Her work has most recently appeared in *Joining the Sisterhood: Young Jewish Women Write Their Lives*, edited by Tobin Belzer and Julie Pelc, SUNY Press, 2003.

1,000 'Birthright' Alumni Now Live in Israel

**The Jerusalem Post
January 4, 2005**

One thousand birthright Israel alumni are now living in Israel as immigrants, soldiers or students, THE JERUSALEM POST reported. Officials at birthright, a five-year-old program dedicated to encouraging Jews aged 18-26 to connect with the country and their heritage through free 10-day trips, said Monday that the program had sent some 75,000 young Jews from 40 countries to Israel. Birthright calculates that prior to the program's inception, only 1,200 18- to 26-year-old Jews came to Israel on educational programs each year.

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This winter, 8,500 are making the trip. Benjamin Seifert, who currently is on a Birthright trip in Israel, said he intended to return to Israel next summer to volunteer. Seifert, who now studies opera at the Royal Academy of Music in London, said the training he received in modern languages at Oxford had given him a familiarity with many foreign cultures. Yet, he noted, "I've never felt I've connected as much with a country as with Israel." He added that the trip had also changed his image of the country, which he had been "very nervous" about visiting. "I thought it was almost like going into a war zone, but I feel very safe," he said, mentioning that he planned to share his experience with family and friends and provide them with a more accurate picture of the place.

Jewish Outreach in Peru

By Michael Freund

Israel National News, January 2, 2005

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/news.php3?id=74588>

The emerging Jewish community of Trujillo in northwest Peru has its first rabbi and full-time Jewish studies educator, thanks to the Jerusalem-based Shavei Israel (www.shavei.org) organization. Rabbi Hanoch Avizedek, a Spanish-speaking Israeli who has previously done Jewish outreach work in South America and India, arrived in Peru last week, where he has begun teaching about Jewish history, tradition and practice. "The community in Trujillo is comprised of truly sincere and unique individuals, all of whom wish to tie their fate with the land and people of Israel," said Shavei Israel Chairman Michael Freund, who visited the community in Peru last year. "When they asked for a teacher to assist them with preparing for their eventual conversion and aliyah, we were only too happy to help."

The Trujillo community dates back to the mid-1960s, when several hundred Peruvian Catholics, headed by a dynamic leader named Segundo Villanueva, abandoned Catholicism and decided to live as Jews. They made their own prayer shawls and shofars, and used the nearby ocean as a mikveh (ritual bath), striving to live in accordance with Jewish law to the best of their ability. In the early 1990s, Israel's Chief Rabbinate dispatched a Beit Din (rabbinical court) to Trujillo, and converted over 200 members of the community to Judaism, all of whom subsequently made aliyah. In 2001, then Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau met one of the veteran Peruvian immigrants while visiting terror victims in a hospital. The immigrant, who had been badly injured in a Palestinian attack in the Jordan Valley, was asked by Rabbi Lau if there was anything he could do to help. "Yes," he replied, "bring over the rest of my family."

After looking into the matter, Rabbi Lau agreed, and a Beit Din was sent by the Chief Rabbinate in December 2001. It converted an additional 84 people, all of whom moved to Israel five months later. Some 100 members of the community remain in Peru, including adherents in the town of Cajamarca and in Lima, the Peruvian capital, where Shavei Israel's Rabbi Avizedek plans to organize classes on their behalf as well. The Chief Rabbinate is currently considering sending an additional Beit Din to Trujillo, which would enable the rest of the community to join their friends and loved ones in Israel.

DRC: Aid Starts to Reach the War-displaced in North Kivu

Integrated Regional Information Networks

January 4, 2005

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Humanitarian workers have ventured into jungles in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since Thursday to deliver food and non-food relief aid to thousands of war-displaced people in North Kivu Province, a UN official told IRIN on Tuesday. "We have been distributing biscuits, protein food stuffs and providing medical assistance to the wounded and sick," Patrick Lavand'homme, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Goma, capital of North Kivu, said. Lavand'homme added that UN peacekeepers escorted the trucks carrying the aid to the forested slopes around the North Kivu towns of Kanyabayonga, Bitonghe, Kayna, Lubero and Kirumbi.

These towns, particularly Kanyabayonga, which is 150 km northeast of Goma, bore the brunt of the latest violence between troops loyal to the Kinshasa government and dissident soldiers of the Congolese army. Most of the towns were deserted at the height of clashes in mid-December. At least 100,000 people fled their homes for the forests during the fighting. Lavand'homme said registration of the displaced started on Thursday. Aid is being delivered by UN agencies and NGOs such as Save the Children, Care International and Medecins Sans Frontieres.

On 22 December, the UN established a 10-km buffer zone between the towns of Kanyabayonga and Lubero, forcing a lull in the fighting. The dissident troops - mostly from the RCD-Goma, a former Rwandan-backed rebel group integrated into Congo's new army - began pulling back from the buffer zone. "We are making a strong appeal to the military to reduce hostilities against the local population," Lavand'homme said. "At one spot, the belligerent troops agreed to abandon a hospital to enable us to provide medical assistance." The DRC is struggling to recover from a five-year war that ended in 2003, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 3.3 million people.

Can Africa Solve African Problems?

By Abraham McLaughlin

The Christian Science Monitor

January 04, 2005

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0104/p07s01-woaf.html>

From conflicts in Sudan, Congo, and Ivory Coast to a boom in Internet use, smooth elections in several countries, and a fresh focus on women and AIDS, the headlines in 2004 gave cause for celebration - and concern. For 2005, one theme stands out: Africa tackling its problems without much outside help.

Conflict in Congo

It's a sobering statistic: 1,000 people are dying each day in eastern Congo, a vast nation in the heart of Africa. And in the past six years of fighting, 3.8 million people have died, according to the International Rescue Committee.

At the outset of 2005, a breakaway military faction is fighting government forces and some 180,000 civilians have fled into the jungle, according to reports. Meanwhile, neighboring Rwanda has dispatched troops into the Central African giant, citing concerns that unfriendly forces in eastern Congo could threaten it. Rwanda is also prospecting for valuable assets like diamonds and gold. Will Congo's turmoil escalate into a broader conflict?

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What to watch:

- For the past decade, international donors have poured money into Rwanda - in part because of lingering guilt over inaction during its 1994 genocide. Some say it's time to stop aid flows to Rwanda to punish it for its Congo incursions. Already, Sweden is withholding one-third of its aid.
- The UN recently added 5,900 peacekeepers to its 10,000-strong force in eastern Congo. Long accused of inaction, the UN force has grown stronger recently, engaging some of the rebel groups. Can the force stay neutral amid complicated factional fighting? And will the UN expand its mandate or increase its peacekeeping force?
- Will Congo pull off elections in June? If so, young President Joseph Kabila, who's leading a transitional government, might be able to consolidate power and establish control over the chaotic eastern region. This could enable him to rein in anti-Rwanda elements, thus decreasing tensions with Congo's neighbor.

Two chances for peace in Sudan

The new year could quickly see a major boost for peace in one of Africa's most-troubled nations. A 20-year conflict in Sudan may finally be ending. The two sides - the northern Muslim government and southern rebels - say they'll sign a final peace deal Jan. 9. If they do, and if they carry it out, the deal could also be a template for solving Sudan's other major conflict - the one in its Darfur province, where the US says genocide has occurred. The deal could even help end a related 18-year insurgency in neighboring Uganda.

But even with a north-south deal in hand, Darfur is a major challenge. Arab militias continue to rape and kill civilians. Some 2.3 million people are displaced - double the number six months ago. About 70,000 are dead. Aid workers and food convoys have been attacked. Some groups, including Save the Children UK, have quit the country. "Darfur is deteriorating," says International Crisis Group analyst John Prendergast. Whether the world can reverse this trend, he and others say, depends on the UN, the US, and the African Union, which is deploying 3,300 troops there.

What to watch:

- If a north-south deal is signed, will Sudan's government be willing to strike a similar pact with Darfur rebels?
- The US has been the major diplomatic force behind the world's response to Darfur. But America's two biggest Darfur advocates - Secretary of State Colin Powell and UN Ambassador John Danforth - have resigned. Will their successors build on their commitment? First signals will come this month during Senate confirmation hearings for Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice.
- Will a UN commission find that genocide happened in Darfur? If so, stalled discussions about further pressuring Sudan's government are likely to be revived. A report is expected this month.

Zimbabwe's power play

Zimbabwe's parliamentary elections, slated for March, will be a major test of whether the once-vibrant nation can halt its economic and political deterioration - and of the continent's commitment to African solutions for African problems. Zimbabwe was one of the region's strongest economies through the mid-1990s - and a major food exporter. Now its official inflation rate is 150 percent, although that's down from around 900 percent earlier last year. Its increasingly dictatorial president, Robert Mugabe, has trained violent youth militias and

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passed laws that suppress or eliminate opposition parties, the press, and civil society.

But Mr. Mugabe has agreed to abide by election standards laid out by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a group of 14 nations that promotes good governance. SADC, as well as South Africa, and Mugabe himself, will be under pressure to ensure the norms are followed. If not, it could be an embarrassing setback for African efforts to improve the continent's international image.

One early indicator:

The opposition Movement for Democratic Change says it will decide this month whether to contest - or pull out of - the elections.

African movies coming to America

This may be the year of African movies coming to a cineplex near you. It could even be a big year for Africa at the Oscars. "Hotel Rwanda," starring Don Cheadle ("Ocean's 12"), is getting strong Oscar buzz for his role as hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina, who saved hundreds of people during Rwanda's 1994 genocide. "Red Dust" stars Hilary Swank ("Boys Don't Cry") in the fictional tale of a US lawyer tackling a murder - and the legacy of the apartheid regime - in South Africa. "Yesterday" is South Africa's official entry in the foreign-film category at the Academy Awards. It's the story of a mother with AIDS who's trying to ensure her daughter gets a good education - even after the mother is gone. It's the first feature-length film in the South African language of Zulu - and one of the first major films from Africa to tackle the issue of AIDS.
