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Blessing Bella

By Leslie Berger

Moment Magazine

August 2004

Last fall, while my husband and sons attended High Holiday services at our architecturally minimalist, Conservative shul in Manhattan, I knelt before the elaborately adorned altar of an ancient temple in Guangzhou, China, while a Buddhist monk drummed and chanted over our newly adopted daughter. There was no question in my mind that we'd be raising Bella as a Jew, that she'd follow her two brothers off to Hebrew school, and that she'd one day learn about the other immigrants in her family who left authoritarian states. I had certainly never dabbled in Buddhism, or any other faith, despite many years of / lapsed Judaic devotion and zealous hedonism. But on that muggy morning in China, in a city steeped in smog, in a courtyard thick with incense I felt compelled to participate in this hypnotic ritual with our 13-month-old girl, as if to seal in her native culture and make sure she left with its blessings.

I was finally in China after nearly two years of meetings, paperwork and waiting-fulfilling a lifelong fantasy of having a family with both biological and adopted children and, I have to admit, a middle-aged yearning for a third kid. Kenny, my husband, had come with me to meet Bella and adopt her in her home province. But he went home early to be with our boys, while I waited for Bella's visa. There were eight other couples in our travel group so I was hardly alone.

The shrine we found ourselves in, a 1,600-year-old landmark called the Six Banyans

Temple, was a lot like China itself-crowded, chaotic, a dramatic blend of old and new, frenzy and serenity. It's 184-foot-tall, red and gold pagoda towered above busy Lin Rong Road, where a bicycle crashed into a taxi just as we were leaving, prompting an argument in the middle of gridlocked traffic. I'd worn a silk skirt for the occasion and dressed Bella in a Chinese-red romper that had belonged to our younger son, Nathan. But the local faithful seemed perfunctory in their devotions. They came and went during the course of their work day, setting down briefcases just long enough to light some incense and prostrate themselves, in Western business clothes, before one of several enormous statues of Buddha surrounded by gladiola-filled urns. By the time we gathered in a shady prayer hall for the babies' blessing, sweat was running down Bella's shaved head and I couldn't help noticing how young and skinny the monk was beneath his saffron robe.

Our group's guide, a meticulous facilitator raised in a proper Communist home, had marched off to find the monk. He came back miffed that the monk wouldn't sound the gong until he ate his lunch. I didn't mind. In fact, even in the stifling heat with a sticky Bella on my hip, I liked the idea that our American folly could wait while he finished his rice. The delay was just the reminder I needed (lest my Jewish soul get swept away by all those flowers and incense) of the universal tension between religious ideals and everyday life. A few months later, back in New York, I thought of that hungry monk again as I heard about juggling Hebrew school with Mandarin school, circumcisions for toddlers under general anesthesia, and gleaming new mikvehs for non-Orthodox conversions, among other innovations for raising foreign-born kids. Clearly, it isn't just adoptive parents and siblings who are adjusting to these new family members, but Judaism itself.

There may be as many as 78,000 adopted children in Jewish homes-about a quarter of them foreign born-according to Professor Barry A. Kosmin, Executive Director of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research in London. Leading demographer, Kosmin was among the authors of the landmark National Jewish Population Survey of 1990, a Jewish census that estimated that 60,000 adopted children represent three percent of Jewish children. Today, adopted children probably comprise between five and six percent of the 1.3 million Jewish kids tallied in the American Jewish Identity Survey, another large study prepared by Kosmin and others in 2000.

Kosmin, who co-authored the book, *The Next Generation: Jewish Children and Adolescents*, sees several trends among adoptive families. For example, Jews are more likely to adopt than others because of our culture's paradoxical emphasis on family as well as professional success. "We say Jewish couples have low fertility but high fecundity," Kosmin says, "meaning they don't have lots of children but there are fewer childless couples. So Jewish couples who get married tend to want children and if they can't, they adopt." (Those observations

are borne out by the 2000 U.S. Census, which found that 2.5 percent of children in all American homes are adopted, compared to Kosmin's estimate of five to six percent in Jewish homes.) Adoptive families also tend to be in the since many are part of interfaith homes. And infertility is no longer the only reason Jews adopt, Kosmin says, citing gay and lesbian parents, many of them single, and what he calls ideological adoptions among couples with biological children - including some who advocate adoption as a way to bolster a shrinking Jewish community.

"I think the most interesting thing today is that all these categories, including who is Jewish, are more complicated. Things are not as clear cut as they used to be."

Kosmin's estimate that 25 percent of adopted Jewish children are foreign-born sounded high to me but entirely plausible. In and around New York, the ever-growing number of Jewish families with Chinese daughters has given rise to an old joke with a new twist. It goes like this:

Two girls, one Caucasian and one Asian, are sitting together in Hebrew school. The white girl asks her classmate, "Are you really Jewish?" And the Asian girl replies, "Sure! Are you?" And the white girl says, "Of course I am!" And the Asian girl says, "Funny, you don't look Jewish."

In my sons' public elementary school alone we've had a Chinese-born San, a Russian-born Sarah, a Paraguayan-born Hanna, and a Gabriel from Vietnam, all with Jewish parents.

The first time I took my Chinese daughter to a temple for a child's service, I was somewhat nervous that she would feel that she might not fit in," recalls Los Angeles screenwriter Shelley Schumacher. "Turned out there were 10 children there that evening-six Chinese girls and four Caucasian boys! When we left, I said to my daughter, it was nice to see so many Chinese girls at the temple. She said, "There weren't any Chinese girls there." She didn't even notice! I noticed, of course. You should have seen two Chinese girls carrying around the little torah."

"It all works out," Schumacher adds. "And my daughter who's almost nine now wants to be a doctor. What more could I ask?"

Traditionally, adoption was an unusual and discrete practice among Jews. Before legalized abortion and the availability of the pill, Jewish authorities and adoption agencies quietly found homes for the mamzers of wayward youth. Since Jews rarely had the option of adopting non-Jewish children, conversion wasn't much of an issue. Today, Jewish women (like American women overall) are having fewer biological children. Jewish women, on average, bear only 1.86 children compared to the 1.93 children produced by American women overall, census figures show. "In general, the higher the level of education, the lower the number

of children. That relationship disproportionately affects the Jewish population since Jewish women are so highly educated," says Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, the National Jewish Population Survey's director of research. With tens of thousands of Jewish parents adopting children overseas-most of unknown but presumed non-Jewish origin-modern Jews are suddenly confronting the intricacies and tribal snobberies of Talmudic law.

In fact, adoption can be fraught with halachic complications. According to strict Jewish law, for example, an adopted girl-even if properly converted in a mikveh may not many a member of the elite Kohen class. An adopted boy; some authorities still insist, may not use his adoptive father's surname but the generic "ben Avraham Avinu" (descendant of Abraham) used by adult converts. An adopted child never brought to a mikveh and converted under the supervision of a bet din or panel of three rabbis, will not be officially recognized as a Jew-meaning no bar mitzvah or inclusion in a minyan. And an Orthodox conversion isn't guaranteed; a rigorous bet din may decide the child's parents aren't observant enough to warrant conversion. Until recently, secular Jewish families seeking conversions had no other choice than mikvehs controlled by Orthodox rabbis.

"The child is converted on the theory it is for his benefit," explains Rabbi J. David Bleich, a Talmudic scholar at Yeshiva University; "The open question is whether it is a benefit for the child to be converted but not provided with a Jewish education and upbringing, with the result that the child is non-observant. If the child is in fact going to be non-observant, then is the conversion a benefit, or exposing him to transgression?"

Well-known examples of adoption punctuate the Bible, such as Mordecai's raising of his heroic cousin Esther and Abraham's adoption of his servant Eliezer. But adoption as a legal procedure was unknown in ancient Jewish law because of its emphasis on bloodlines and lineage, says Rabbi Michael Gold, who leads Temple Beth Torah in Tamarac, Fla., and has written widely on adoption and Judaism.

"Maybe we can someday envision Judaism beyond lineage but right now, it's a big pan," says Rabbi Gold, an adoptive father of three American-born children and the author of *And Hannah Wept: Infertility, Adoption and the Jewish Couple*. My husband and I were just beginning to plan Bella's conversion and naming ceremony when I interviewed Rabbi Gold and admitted I was having a hard time reconciling my modern sensibilities with such ancient exclusivity. How dare anyone challenge my daughter's right to marry a Kohen! "Whenever I see anything in Jewish tradition I find troubling," Rabbi Gold tells me, "I think of the things I can learn from it. Part of what I've learned from this is that genetics do make a difference in who we are not a total difference because, obviously, we are a combination of nature and nurture. My kids' identities, values and

relationships all come from my wife and me. But their raw talent and looks don't come from us."

Rabbi Gold's worth resonated with me. My husband and I have often marvel over how little control we really have over our sons' innate abilities and interests. Still, I was having second thoughts about converting Bella, the remarkable toddler we were just beginning to know. Did our family really need to be vetted by a bet din? Hadn't Bella immediately responded when my mother played the old Yiddish clapping game, *potcbkee potchkee kihele* with her, and wasn't this evidence enough of her Jewishness?

I remembered the disconcerting experience of another parent, Isabel Berkowitz, when her three-year-old daughter Hanna, from landlocked Paraguay, freaked out in the mikveh. "Don't make me do this!" Hanna had screamed, scandalizing the mikveh matron. (Three years later, after swimming lessons, Hanna didn't want to get out) I thought of another Biblical adoption-of Moses transplanted into the Pharaoh's court, a classic outsider pain* aware of how different he was-and wondered how best to protect Bella from ever feeling marginalized. Would she someday resent being converted without her consent? On would she suffer more if anyone ever challenged her Jewish status?

I was hardly alone in my doubts. Linda Kingston, *the adoptive* mother of two Guatemalan-born sisters, now five and six, decided with her husband Keith to let theft daughters make up their own minds about conversion when they're older. "I feel that religion is about what's in your heart and your head, if you have Jewish beliefs then you are Jewish. Religion should have nothing to do with blood ties," Kingston wrote from her home in Farmington Hills, Michigan. Kingston nonetheless sent her daughters to a Jewish preschool and plans to hire a tutor for their religious instruction.

Tracy Schneider, a social worker and single parent from the Bronx, longed for the affirmation of a ritual conversion but had trouble finding a sponsor for her Chinese-born daughter, Emma, now five. A local Reform rabbi refused to do it unless she joined his temple. A Lubavitch rabbi offered, but only if Schneider would study with him, telling her she was too ignorant to raise a good Jew. "I said to him, 'if this baby came out of my body, nobody would question my ability to raise her as a Jewish person or to be a Jewish mother. But because she's not biological, you're making that distinction. I was so angry about that.'" Finally Schneider found a Conservative rabbi who "could not have been nicer. He said to me, 'It's a mitzvah for rue to do this.'"

Rabbi Susan Silverman and her husband, journalist Yosef Abramowitz, have waited four years to complete the conversion of theft adopted son, Adar, so it can take place in a new, progressive mikveh near their home in Newton, Massachusetts-the Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh and

Education Center. Born in Ethiopia and adopted at eight months, Adar, now 5, was circumcised under general anesthesia at age one to prepare him for conversion. Silverman, ordained as a Reform rabbi and raising Adar along with three biological daughters, originally wanted an Orthodox conversion so that no one could ever make Adar doubt his Judaism or exclude him from a minyan. But a local Orthodox rabbi "was so incredibly rude and demeaning" that she decided to hold off. She says his attitude was that they should not assume there would even be a mikveh ceremony. The bet din might not approve the conversion. "My husband said, 'What we do is authentic; we don't need to go to the Orthodox community for its seal of approval.'"

Many adoptive families today practice Judaism while fostering pride in their children's native oilmm. Lisa Gibbs and her husband Philip Kasinitz, of Brooklyn, have made such an effort to honor both traditions that her older daughter, Basya, 8, has confused Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with the Chinese Autumn Moon Festival. "As far as we're concerned, we're raising her biculturally," says Gibbs. In Manhattan, Martin Fradis said he and his wife Kim are less inclined to promote Asian culture for their Vietnamese-horn eight-year-old son, Gabriel. "This is the family he's in, this is the choice we made for him, and being Jewish is just part of the package." Though they enjoy Vietnamese food, participate in Asian New Year's festivals, and have talked to Gabe about the wars in Indochina, their main family customs are Jewish. So far, Gabe has agreeably followed his older sister Rebecca to Hebrew school.

It isn't always so easy One father in an affluent, predominantly white suburb of New York is taking Chinese classes with his 10-year-old daughter as a peace offering because she has balked at going to Shabbat services and bluntly told her parents she doesn't fit in there. During a tantrum over Hebrew school, the girl cried, in reference to her conversion, "And you never should have dunked me!" Another father of two Chinese-born girls, an academic who did not want his family identified, told of quitting their Reform synagogue in the Southwest because of the racist attitudes there. In one instance, he said, an older congregant asked why he and his wife had chosen to adopt "schwartzes" instead of white children.

"The *only* racist comments that we ever received since our adoption of these two children have been at our synagogue," this father told me. "Never a comment in a store or a restaurant or a school or *anywhere else*. *Only* at the synagogue did we encounter racial comments about adopting these children from China.

As I discovered while preparing for Bella's conversion, adoption, for all the hope and joy it offers, also inevitably leads to the explosive question of who is a Jew. It exposes some hard truths about our community-about the values and vanity that contributed to have diminished fertility, the growing estrangement between the observant and the secular, and the racist strains in some of our traditions.

Adoption, says demographer Gary Tobin, "ties into a wider set of issues, which I call the Jewish obsession with bloodline."

A Jewish policy analyst and president of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research in San Francisco, Tobin believes that Judaism's traditional emphasis on lineage, and its perpetuation of a caste system that favors Kohens over Levis and Ashkenazim over Sephardim, are crippling a community sorely in need of fresh blood. "Most ancient peoples are hierarchical and Judaism has taken ancient hierarchy and ideas into modern times," Tobin says. "There's a huge dash of cultures going on in Judaism between those ancient hierarchies and ideas and the realities of contemporary Jewish life. If half of Jews are intermarrying and there are increasing numbers of Jews who are adopting and more and more people want to convert to become part of the Jewish people, our ancient ideas become barriers."

Tobin had already been writing about the subject when he and his wife adopted their son Jonah, an African-American boy who is now seven and attends Jewish day school. Now Tobin advocates adoption as a way to rejuvenate the Jewish community. "We are obsessed with intermarriage and how everyone's leaving rather than opening the gate and making it more vibrant by welcoming people in," says Tobin, author of the book, *Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion Can Revitalize the Jewish Community*.

"Everybody who is so concerned about the size and vitality of the Jewish community would be doing a great mitzvah for the Jewish people, and for themselves, by adopting children," Tobin says.

Abramowitz, journalist and adoptive father to Ethiopian-born Adar, agrees. In this magazine's April issue, for example, he proposed several strategies for "doubling the number of Jews in the world in the next generation ... We can triple the number of intermarried families who raise their children as Jews, encourage adoption after families have had their biological children, welcome back the spiritual exiles, offer incentives for having more children, lower the assimilation rate of our young people and actively share the option of Judaism with the broadest possible audience. While some of these strategies raise serious halachic issues we can contend with them creatively and honestly."

Silverman, his wife, insists this was not their primary motivation for adopting Mar or for planning a second adoption. Like me, Silverman said she had always imagined a family of both biological and adopted children. Adoption for her is a deeply spiritual act, one that reflected the origin of the family of God.

As I listened to her speak, I couldn't help sighing. I knew at that moment that I'd go ahead with Bellä conversion, if for no other reason than to seal her union with us and make sure she entered her opinionated new community with its blessings.

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"When we say blessings, we bring ourselves from the immediacy of that moment into something much larger," Silverman explains. "I feel that what adoption does. When I look at my son, I can't just think of that moment. I'm always conscious and aware of the forces that brought him to me. I'm always conscious of God in our lives and of people we'll never know who did good things to bring this child into our lives and make sure he'd have a good life. I'm also conscious of the incredible loss on the part of his birth mother that never leaves my heart. I'm really conscious of the poverty, economic circumstances and other circumstances that prevented this woman from raising her own child. And that's God, the creator of good and of evil, of the whole spectrum. It's all mirrored on earth in this one adoption, in this one child.

"Adar is amazing," Silverman says, "and he's a symbol of what's amazing."

Peering Into the Hidden World of Crypto-Jews

By Joe Eskenazi

J. the Jewish News Weekly of Northern California

Friday August 13, 2004

Hundreds of Jewish women waved their Magen David necklaces at Yaacov Gladstone and shouted in a joyous, unified chorus: "We are no longer afraid!" Gladstone was visiting Belmonte, Portugal, where, after centuries of practicing their Judaism in secret, the locals came out of the Jewish closet six years ago. The border town currently sports a synagogue and at least 200 Jews. "They no longer have to hide the light from the Sabbath candles. The women showed us the clay jugs they used. Inside there was a little vessel with olive oil they lit for Shabbat, and the neighbors couldn't see it," said Gladstone, a retired Yiddish and Hebrew teacher and social activist who is a member of the Society for Crypto-Jewish Studies.

"They showed me where they secretly baked the matzah. After 500 years of no teachers or rabbis, they had forgotten the prayers of the seder and forgotten everything. The women created their own prayers. The only Hebrew word they remembered was 'Adonai.'" Contrary to popular (and intuitive) belief, the Spanish Inquisition may have been at its most destructive in the neighboring Iberian nation of Portugal. Given the option to flee or convert, thousands of Jews left Spain for its western neighbor in 1492. But in 1496, Portugal's King Emmanuel did not want to let his Jews go, and thousands were forcibly converted, killed or committed suicide.

As a result, many Iberian Jews adopted elaborate secret rituals, which they mixed with Catholic practices. Over the course of time, some completely forgot their Jewish identity, yet continued practicing the rituals. Gladstone, who lives in New York City and Israel, believes that quite a few of the Bay Area's Latino residents may be Crypto-Jews, whether they know it or not. He urges those with

questions about their backgrounds to check out the SCJS Web site, www.cryptojews.com.

“The children ask, ‘Why can’t we eat milk and meat together? Why do we light the candles on Friday? Why do we cover the mirrors when someone dies?’” said Gladstone, who works as a therapist with Ethiopian Israeli children and other young Israeli immigrants. He traveled through the Bay Area last week en route to attending the 14th annual SCJS conference in Portland, Ore. “The answer is always, ‘That’s our family tradition.’ They never say, ‘Because we’re Jewish.’”

Gladstone, a blond-haired Montrealer with blue eyes and the lingering hint of a French Canadian accent, does not have a Crypto-Jewish background himself — he grew up in a Yiddish-speaking Canadian Jewish communist household. At a young age, he became an ardent Zionist, and at one point the native French-speaker helped to lead a refugee boat of North African Jews to Israel. The North Africans told of their familial ties to the expelled Spanish and Portuguese Jews, and Gladstone’s life changed forever.

Much of Gladstone’s life has been spent working with Jewish minorities, such as black American Jews, Crypto-Jews and Ethiopian Israelis. In his work for the SCJS, he has helped introduce Crypto-Jews to the world of Jewish tradition and liturgy. Even centuries after the Inquisition, some Crypto-Jews keep their religion hidden, fearing rejection by the Jewish community. The SCJS, Gladstone assures, is not a proselytizing organization, but it is welcoming — even if many Crypto-Jews are wary of it.

“Instead of encouraging and embracing and ... using them as an example, we tend to push them away with all our questions. Where did your grandmother get married? How do we know you’re telling the truth? These are such painful questions for many of them,” he said. As one Portuguese Crypto-Jew who formally converted at a New York City Reform temple told Gladstone, “How do they expect our grandparents or great-grandparents to save any documents? They were afraid to have anything in the house that showed we are of Jewish descent.” So far, the SCJS has fielded a pair of calls from possible Crypto-Jews in the Bay Area, but neither is ready to seriously talk about Judaism, at least for now. And, noted Gladstone, every Crypto-Jew he’s met has passed down his or her tradition in a different way. Perhaps the most unique was a woman who finally found out why her ostensibly Catholic grandmother never quite knelt down and prayed in “gibberish” during holidays.

“She would make the cross and say, ‘I don’t believe in idols, I don’t believe in idols, please forgive me Adonai, please forgive me Adonai,’” he recalled. Now “they can announce openly ‘We are not what you think we are. We are not Catholic. We are Jews.’”

Spanish Crypto-Jews Show Solidarity With Israel

Israel National News

August 27, 2004

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/news.php3?id=68025>

For the first time, a group of 19 Bnai Anousim (people whose ancestors were forcibly converted to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition) has arrived on a solidarity visit with the Jewish state organized by the Amishav organization.

The members of the group, who hail from Spain and Portugal, will tour the country, hear lectures on Judaism, Israel and anti-Semitism, and spend Shabbat in Jerusalem. They will also visit Safed, home to a number of famous synagogues built by Sephardi exiles from Spain in the Middle Ages, and meet with Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Amar.

"This is an historic event," said Amishav Director Michael Freund. "Bnai Anousim are proudly standing up and affirming their support for Israel. After so many centuries of enforced separation, the return of our brethren has begun."

Next week, the group will meet with Minister of Diaspora Affairs Natan Sharansky, and will present him with "Megillat HaAnousim" (the Scroll of the Bnai Anousim), a document signed by hundreds of Bnai Anousim around the world expressing their support for the State of Israel.

The document reads, in part:

"Ever since they were compelled to abandon their faith, the path of our forefathers has been long and difficult over the past 500 years, but nevertheless we are here..."

"Our search for our roots arises out of the need and the desire to bind our fate once again with that of the people of Israel. We wish to express our whole-hearted support for the State of Israel, as well as the solidarity we feel with the victims of terror and violence in the State of Israel, all of whom are dear to our hearts."

"Be certain that those of us in Spain and Portugal that shall do everything we can, both personally and collectively, to struggle against anti-Zionism and the hatred of Jews. This document is a clarion call, in which we wish to declare to one and all: 'we are here, and we shall always stand by your side.'"

Berkeley Survivor Donates her Slave-labor Compensation to Aid Sudanese Refugees

By Joe Eskenazi

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If actions speak louder than words, then Dora Sorell has just emitted an ear-shattering shout. The Auschwitz survivor, forced laborer and Holocaust lecturer has opted to donate the slave-labor compensation issued to her more than 60 years after the fact to a Jewish organization aiding Sudanese refugees.

“I wanted to show the connection between the Holocaust and another genocide,” said the 82-year-old Berkeley retired doctor and professor. “I would like to popularize the cause. It’s nice to make the connection between what happened 60 years ago and today.”

Sorell admits the donation to the American Jewish World Service, at \$3,043, is “not a big amount.” But she hopes the symbolism won’t be lost on anyone, and perhaps others will follow suit. “If you get money from the Germans and give it to Sudan, maybe others will get the idea,” she said.

Ruth Messinger, president of the AJWS, said she was “moved to tears” by Sorell’s gesture. “I called her to tell her that I can’t think of any contribution that meant so much to me,” said Messinger. “We’ve never had anything like this happen before. I think she’s amazing.”

Sorell lost her parents, two brothers and scores of other relatives in Auschwitz, where she was deported to after being expelled from her native Romania. Following the war, she was miraculously reunited with her boyfriend, Tzali, whom she married 59 years ago this week.

Sorell put herself through medical school, and she served as a doctor and professor of rehabilitative medicine in New York. Now retired, she and her husband moved to Berkeley nine years ago to be closer to family. The birth of her first granddaughter in 1982 led her to break her silence and pen a Holocaust memoir, “Tell the Children: Letters to Miriam.”

An active speaker with the Holocaust Center of Northern California, Sorell considers her donation to be a similar step in the preservation of the memory of the Holocaust — and its painful lessons. “I don’t want to make money off anything from the Holocaust,” said Sorell, who previously donated restitution funds to Hadassah. “I didn’t care to use another \$3,000. If you don’t need slave money, maybe others will be inspired to do the same.”

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To donate to the **American Jewish World Service's** Sudan emergency appeal, go to www.ajws.org, or call (212) 736-2597. To donate to the **Jewish Coalition for Disaster Relief's** Sudan efforts, visit www.jcdr.org, or call (212) 885-0892.

Interfaith 'Day of Conscience' calls for intervention in Sudan

By Alexandra J. Wall

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Friday August 27, 2004

A parable from the great Jewish sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai was uttered on the steps of San Francisco's City Hall on Wednesday, Aug. 25, as some 200 people of diverse backgrounds and faiths gathered to call attention to the situation in Sudan. A group of men are together in a boat, and one starts boring a hole beneath his seat. When another man asks what he is doing, he responds, "It is not your concern; the hole is only under my seat." The other man replies, "You will sink the whole ship, and we will all drown."

"These brutal acts of horror must be the responsibility of all of us," said Rabbi Doug Kahn, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council. The Holocaust. The Cambodian killing fields. The Armenian genocide. All of these were invoked at the interfaith rally to call attention to the horrors taking place in Darfur, Sudan. The "Day of Conscience" in San Francisco was one of many such interfaith events taking place nationwide to focus on the crisis. Among them was a breakfast that day in Marin.

As described by Glen Galaich, director of the Northern California chapter of Human Rights Watch, and Sudanese native Silvestro Akara Bakhiet, president of the Pageri Organization and representative of the Diocese of Torit-Sudan, the situation in Sudan is extremely dire. A government-backed militia known as the Janjaweed has been killing tribal farmers, raping women and razing homes and villages. More than 50,000 people have been killed and 2 million have been displaced.

Kahn also quoted Israeli poet Avraham Shlonsky, who visited a destroyed Europe at the end of World War II and wrote, "Lest from this we learned nothing." Those attending the noontime rally at City Hall wore green ribbons to show solidarity with the people of Sudan. Each speaker released a white dove after speaking. Kahn frequently invoked the Holocaust in his remarks. "The perpetrators thrive on the world's silence, we know this all too well from our own history, so we must not be silent," he said. "We must not be numbed by our own inability to see each human being as made in the image of God." Kahn continued, "Indifference is not an option when the threat of genocide looms."

Each speaker emphasized that the international community must intervene, or it would be held accountable. Haig Baghdassarian, government affairs director of

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the Bay Area Armenian National Committee, began his remarks by declaring that it was almost 65 years ago to the day that someone asked, "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Of course that someone was Adolf Hitler asking that question in 1939, as he was about to wage his war against the Jews. It was only 20 years after the Turks killed 1.5 million Armenians.

Calling the 20th century the "bloodiest century of all time," Baghdassarian warned, "Let's act now so that in 20 years, no one will say 'Who remembers the annihilation of the Sudanese?'" Other participating organizations included the United Religions Initiative, American Jewish World Service, San Francisco Interfaith Council, Beyt Tikkun, the Anti-Defamation League, and Muslim, Protestant and Roman Catholic groups.

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) co- sponsored a Vigil for Sudan on August 25, 2004 at 12:00 noon at the SF Civic Center plaza with the Jewish Community Relations Council and other Bay Area faith-based, humanitarian, and human rights organizations for the victims of massive humanitarian and human rights violations in Darfur, Sudan.

The Save Darfur Coalition, composed of faith-based, humanitarian and secular civic organizations, has identified Wednesday, August 25, 2004 as Sudan: Day of Conscience. On that day, communities across North America are urged to engage in interfaith activities -- designed to raise public awareness about the horrific situation in Darfur and to urge the international community to take immediate and decisive action to stop the killing, the rape, and the destruction of villages, and to assure that humanitarian relief reaches all those in need as quickly as possible.

Congratulations all Around, as Country Swells with Pride

Ha'aretz

By Rami Hipsh

August 26, 2004

<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/469404.html>

Gal Fridman became the first Israeli to win a gold Olympics medal yesterday when he scored 42 points in the windsurfing event at the Athens Games. During the ceremony, the Israeli national anthem Hatikva was played at the Olympic Games for the first time, while Fridman and the dozens of Israelis in the audience sang along.

Alex Giladi, the Israeli representative on the International Olympic Committee, bestowed the medal on Fridman, who was draped in an Israeli flag. Dozens of Israelis rushed to the podium after Fridman was awarded his medal and

celebrated with him. "This is a dream come true, great fun," said Fridman after the ceremony. "There is no higher summit than this in sports."

Fridman, whose gold medal makes him the first Israeli to win two Olympic medals, added that he also hoped to win the gold medal at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. He won a bronze medal in the 1996 Olympics. "I didn't believe that so many people would come to the ceremony," said Fridman. "Everyone sang Hatikva with such intensity that people were in shock, they didn't understand where it came from."

Fridman dedicated his victory to the 11 Israelis killed in the Munich massacre at the 1972 Olympics, vowing he would visit their memorial to show them his medal. "I'm sure they're watching us," said Fridman, who was born three years after the Israeli athletes and coaches were killed following an attack on the Olympic village in Germany by Palestinian terrorists. "We think about them all the time," he said. "They're always in our mind. When I get home I will go to the memorial place for them and show them the gold medal."

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon called to congratulate Fridman after the ceremony, saying, "Israel is very proud of you. An entire nation held its breath this afternoon during the last race. We were all excited to see you win. We always knew that you were worthy of a medal, and you got it. The confidence and serenity you demonstrated throughout the contest were remarkable. You are truly a great sportsman. Israel is very proud of you." Sharon also congratulated Fridman's trainer Gur Steinberg, and the entire team that accompanied him.

"Today, Gal simply raced with a lot of confidence and he deserved this victory," said Steinberg. "Thanks to the entire country for all its support ... This shows that we can beat other countries." President Moshe Katsav also congratulated Fridman, and invited him for a meeting to give him "a hug."

"Gal brought much honor to the State of Israel, and much happiness to its residents," Katsav said. Citing Fridman's modesty and determination, Katsav said, "The citizens of the State of Israel and the Jewish people are proud of you, love you, and are happy for your impressive accomplishment, the first in the history of Israel." Fridman's victory brought screams of delight in shops and offices across the country. Many were glued to television sets, which repeatedly showed him crossing the finish line in triumph. "To see our flag displayed and hear our national anthem played at the awards ceremony is a moment we have long been waiting for," team chief Gilad Lustig said.

Residents of Fridman's hometown of Karkur, near Hadera, streamed to the family's house to celebrate. "Gal dreamed about this, and he always succeeds," said Fridman's father, Uri. "This is one of the greatest moments in his life, and I'm glad he had such a major victory." Fridman's mother, Deganit, was waiting to

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hear from her son in person. "I can't believe that he won until he tells me himself," she said. "I don't think he'll rest even now. Maybe he'll try to do it again at the next Olympics. I was tense and it was hard for me to watch the race."

The Jewish National Fund announced yesterday that it will plant 14 trees in Jerusalem's Peace Forest in Fridman's honor. The number adds up to the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word for gold. Education, Culture and Sport Minister Limor Livnat's comments punned on Fridman's first name, which means "wave" in Hebrew. "One can say that Gal Fridman rode the wave and brought with him the entire State of Israel, filling us with great pride."

Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said Fridman's victory was a historic event. "This is a holiday for Israeli sports and for the State of Israel." But perhaps Fridman himself says it best. "It feels like a dream," he said after his victory. "It's an amazing, indescribable feeling. I'm happy that you were all able to view the race live. I simply felt that the entire country was pushing me from behind. I suddenly felt extra energies, and I didn't know where they came from."

Israel's Black Hebrews are Selling White Substance to Middle-class Homes, but No One's Complaining

**Heeb Magazine
July 2004 Issue**

Recently, tofu has gone from food fad to mainstream nosh in the eyes of Israeli consumers. In addition to Tivol's veggie wieners and Zongloweck's tofu-based corn schnitzels, supermarket shoppers from Afula to Eilat now find themselves choosing from more than a dozen different types of fresh tofu, as well as a range of soya yogurts, desserts and vegan "cheeses," hard and soft. But, what few shoppers realize is that one of the leading brands of locally produced, fresh tofu is manufactured not by Tivol or Zongloweck, but by a small community of African-Americans who live in Israel's Hebev desert and claim to be their brethren.

The bulk of Israel's Black Hebrew community arrived in Israel in the 1070s, claiming to be the descendants of Jews who moved to Africa after the destruction of the second temple and who were later shipped to the United States as slaves. Unlike most Jews, however, the Black Hebrews are strict vegans, interpreting Genesis 29:1 literally, restricting their diet to fruits and vegetables. As far as the Black Hebrews are concerned, chicken soup and kneidlach are as kosher as ham and eggs, and the less said about kishke, the better.

Their return to the Promised Land, however, was met less than enthusiastically. The rabbinate rejected their appeals for citizenship, leaving them vulnerable to deportation under the Law of Return, and their stay in Israel has remained tenuous. Moving to the desert town of Dimona, they quietly established their

community near the nuclear power station and remained on the fringes of Israeli society. Until now.

As Israelis have become more accepting of different diets, the Black Hebrews – Israel's largest vegan community – have begun to feel the benefits, both financially and socially. According to Avraham ben Isrel, the owner and manager of Nature's Gate tofu factory, the Israeli public's recent interest in all things soya has increased production by more than 20 percent. The factory, founded in 1985, now produces between 10 and 12 tons of tofu every month and is set to expand.

"I have a list of over 200 products that I'm already making for the community here," said ben Israel, who was born Adrian Butler and moved to Israel 34 years ago. "A lot of the products that have been made at Tivol and Zongloweck, I've been making for a while now, I just haven't distributed them. Once we establish ourselves, we're going to come out strong."

With a world-class choir and a reputation for natural health care, the community has already gone some way toward establishing a higher profile. But the real push, says ben Israel, came with the outbreak of mad cow disease in Europe and the search for vegetarian alternatives. "Even in Dimona, which is majority Sephardim who have no knowledge – had no knowledge, I could say- of soya products and a healthy diet, they're coming out of the woodwork and up to the factory to buy products, and that's been amazing."

But, while tofu appears to be bringing recognition for Israel's African-American Jews, even ben Israel admits that his factory and its 17 employees are unlikely to turn the country into a nation of vegans. "They're still going to have the chickens and the fish and some red meat," he said of his shawarma-devouring compatriots, "but it's not going to be so heavy. They're going to try and put tofu into their diets. But, when you go and buy tofu, you got to know what tofu is," he warned. "You don't want to buy one that's too white."

One Love: Meet Matisyahu

Interview by D.J. Waletzky

Heeb Magazine

Spring 2004 Issue

Matisyahu is a 24-year-old reggae phenom out of Crown Heights. When I met him coming back from a Hanukah get-together with his family, it's a quarter to midnight in Grand Central Station, and he's got a menorah in a plastic supermarket bag. Our photographer asks the 6'4" MC if we can get a picture of him standing on line at a hot-dog stand. "Thing is, it's not kosher," explains Matisyahu. "It's dope that it says 'Shofar' on it, though."

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His soft-spoken accent, equal parts b-boy and yeshiva bocher, belies his New York upbringing – he grew up a Reconstructionist Jew in White Plains. But when he gets onstage, he delivers flawless dancehall rhymes. At 18, he had a moderately successful beatbox act in Oregon; after it collapsed, he moved to New York to go to college. His debut album, *Shake Off the Dust, Arise* is due in April on Jdub Records.

Heeb Magazine: So, when did you start doing reggae as 'Matisyahu'?

Matisyahu: Last winter. I'd been in yeshiva for almost a year, and I hadn't done any music at all. For a year. Basically, I hadn't listened to music, I hadn't played music, I hadn't written anything new. And they did a Union Square Hanukkah festival, lighting the menorah. The same shaliach who I became religious through, a friend of mine, he knew I did this kind of stuff, so he asked me to come one night. I called a guitar player, along with a drummer, we set up, and it was awesome. And from that I started the band.

Heeb Magazine: Do you prefer roots to dancehall?

Matisyahu: I like a mixture of two. I like rootsy tracks, but with dancehall energy. I don't like that overdone beat, you know, [beatboxing] with a heavy sound to it. I like more of a rootsy kind of organic, real melodic kinda feel to it. But I like the deliverance of the lyrics to be punchy, you know?

Heeb Magazine: Is your music always religious-themed? Do you ever, say, talk about yourself?

Matisyahu: Yeah, well, I mean, the whole thing is about myself. The whole concept of this music is about...like the name of the album, *Shake Off the Dust, Arise*, is all about overcoming, it's all about beating the negative forces. A person has negative forces and positive forces, and it's all about that war.

Behind Every Rocket is a Story

By Michael Freund

The Jerusalem Post

August 25, 2004

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1093325271347&p=1006953079865>

Glancing at the headlines, it is easy to think that all is quiet in Israel these days. With an occasional exception, there are hardly any more terrorist attacks grabbing the headlines, and daily life seems to be returning to normal. Sure, every once in a while we hear something about a few mortar rounds being fired at Jews in Gaza, or about an attempted stabbing or two in Jerusalem. But

for the most part, life in the Holy Land appears to be back on track. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth.

Appearances notwithstanding, the Palestinian war against Israel continues, and it would be foolish to think otherwise. Take, for example, the events of August 18, when Palestinian terrorists in Gaza launched a couple of Kassam rockets at the Jewish community of Neve Dekalim. The incident was duly reported, and then quickly forgotten, just another passing item on the media's radar screen.

But behind every rocket, there is a story. And in this case, it proved to be a painful, and tragic one. August 18 was a quiet Wednesday afternoon, and Donel Benjamin was sitting at home, working on his computer, when the rocket struck.

Donel, a 25-year old who made aliyah from India in 1997, is a member of the Bnei Menashe, a group claiming descent from a lost tribe of Israel. He works in Neve Dekalim's supermarket, and decided to go home for a quick afternoon break before returning to work. But the Palestinian projectile changed all that, when it blasted its way through the first floor of Donel's house, nearly destroying the structure and wiping out the family's belongings.

Miraculously, Donel's mother and brother, who were home at the time, were unharmed, but Donel himself was not so lucky. Shrapnel from the rocket tore its way through his flesh, causing grave damage to his legs and head. He was rushed to a hospital in Beersheba, and underwent emergency surgery, which may very well have saved his life. Donel is now recovering from his wounds, his head wrapped in bandages. Thankfully, he remembers nothing of the attack, but complains of the pain that he still feels throughout his entire body.

His four siblings and his mother, a widow, are by his side, hoping and praying for his speedy recovery. The local municipal council has already begun work to repair Donel's home, but the family now faces enormous obstacles, both financial and psychological, with which they must contend.

Of course, none of this was reported in the media, which incorrectly asserted that Donel was a foreign worker and that he had received "only" moderate wounds. And that is truly unfortunate, because while his current situation might be heartrending, Donel's story is in fact an inspiration. As a member of the Bnei Menashe, Donel grew up in the far reaches of northeastern India, in the lush green hills of the state of Mizoram. There, he was raised to believe that he and the members of his tribe were descendants of Israel, the offspring of Jews who had been forced into exile many centuries ago, where they lost contact with mainstream Judaism.

Nonetheless, they continued to preserve the memory of their Jewish ancestry, and to live according to the laws of Moses as best they could, from circumcision

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to the Sabbath to the laws of family purity. From generation to generation, they passed down the tradition, clinging to it as best they could. Donel, and others like him, dreamed of one day making aliyah, thereby closing a historical circle and returning to the land of their ancestors.

In the past decade, Donel and his family, along with some 800 other members of the Bnei Menashe, have made aliyah under the auspices of *Amishav*, the organization which I head. All of the immigrants undergo formal conversion and build new lives as Israelis and Jews in every respect. They are productive members of society, they serve in the army, support themselves, and live observant Jewish lifestyles.

But another 6,000 are still stuck in India, waiting to fulfill the dream of return. And the only impediment standing in their way is the refusal of Interior Minister Avraham Poraz to allow them to come. For over a year, Poraz has adamantly refused to budge, citing, among other reasons, the Bnei Menashe's religious observance, and their desire to live in the territories, as things he finds objectionable.

Recently, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, sent two rabbinical emissaries to India to visit the Bnei Menashe, study the community and its background, and report back to him on their findings. I accompanied the rabbis on their visit, and we have every reason to believe that the result will be favorable, and that the Bnei Menashe will at last receive the official recognition from Israel which they have sought for so long. But in the meantime, as Donel recovers from his wounds, his countless friends and family members still in India wait impatiently, hoping they too will be given a chance to come home to Israel.

They are undeterred by the violence, nor are they dissuaded by the obstacles which Poraz puts in their path. Their goal is to rejoin the Jewish people after centuries of separation, and they are confident that this will come to pass. So as much as the Palestinians might wish to scare the Jewish people with their rockets and their missiles, Donel and the Bnei Menashe stand as living proof that they will never succeed. Because come what may, the dream of returning to Zion lives on.

The writer serves as Director of Amishav (www.amishav.org.il), a Jerusalem-based group which reaches out and assists "lost Jews" seeking to return to the Jewish people.
