

Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue)

**We are different cultures, languages and colors,
yet we share Israel, Hebrew and Torah**

A Program of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research
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Be'chol Lashon Update 6/1/04

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Dear Be'chol Lashon:

Please note: We will not publish a Be'chol Lashon update next week as we will be in Chicago at the opening of Rabbi Funnye's new synagogue (for details, see last week's update).

We hope to see you there!

Institute for Jewish & Community Research

The American Jewish World Service Relief Fund

May 31, 2004
JTA

The American Jewish World Service is collecting relief for flood victims in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Funds can be sent to the American Jewish World Service, Haiti/DR Flood Relief, 45 W. 36th St., 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018. Donations also can be made by phone, at 800-889-7146, or on the Web at www.ajws.org.

Diversity rules at one-of-a-kind Shavuot festival

by Dan Pine
5/28/04

J, the Jewish news weekly of Northern California

There wasn't a bagel in sight. Instead, the hundreds of moms, dads and kids attending the multicultural Shavuot festival at the Berkeley Richmond Jewish Community Center had other fish to fry. It made sense to forgo the customary Askenazic fare. Though just about everyone at the Sunday, May 23, event was Jewish, most of the people were of African, Asian and Latino descent. Most of the music rocked with a Ugandan beat. And the cherished ideal of *am Yisrael*, the people of Israel, on this day came in rainbow colors.

Sponsored by Be'chol Lashon ("In Every Tongue") of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, the free festival was geared toward Jews who don't fit the profile of white Yiddishkeit European. The day featured workshops, children's activities, food and drink, a book fair and the pleasure of truly diverse Jewish company. "There are hundreds of racially and ethnically diverse Jews in the Bay Area," said Be'chol Lashon co-founder Gary Tobin. "Converts, adoptees, religious seekers. Today one out of seven Jewish households here is interracial, with a 70 percent intermarriage rate." Tobin should know. He's a respected San Francisco-based demographer. Moreover, he's the parent of an adopted African American boy, age 9, and raised Jewish.

As folks arrived at the festival, most helped themselves to lunch, which consisted of plantains, fish kabobs and other Senegalese treats. Rabbi Capers Funnye, spiritual leader of Chicago's 70-family-strong Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation, got things going with a rousing keynote speech. "Take a good look at who's sitting in this room," he told the throng. "These children represent the diversity possible in Jewish life. You are the future of the Jewish community." He then led everyone in a sing-along version of "Hine Ma Tov," with a decidedly West African beat.

From there, kids scampered to the face painting and art stations, while the adults attended a variety of workshops. In the transracial adoption workshop, mostly white parents of black, Latino and Asian children discussed the joys and challenges of raising their kids Jewish. Said one dad of the multicultural attendees, "I wish this was a congregation I could come to, so my kids could say, 'Hey, my family looks just like that family.'" Added another mom, referring to the tolerant attitudes she finds here, "We can't leave the Bay Area, ever."

Beth Sauerhaft of Berkeley came with her 5-year-old Chinese-born daughter, Danya. "My daughter is not perceived as Jewish," she lamented. "We're not taught to see diversity in Judaism." She decided to form a group of families like hers — Jews adopting Chinese children. When she and other such families get together, she says, "I feel like I've come home with my daughter. We can see that Jews don't all look one way or practice one way."

Also in attendance was Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, spiritual leaders of the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda, an isolated group now gaining worldwide attention. Sizomu currently lives in Los Angeles, finishing up his rabbinical studies at the University of Judaism. He flew up for the festival with his wife, Tzipporah, and their two children. "This is what it's supposed to be," said the upbeat Sizomu of the gathering. "God is one."

As an ad hoc African drum circle took the stage, Joe and Danita Behnke, an interracial Jewish couple from San Jose, looked on with satisfaction. "This is about coming to a place and meeting people like us," said Joe Behnke, clutching his 2-year-old son, Isaiah. "Seeing this kind of cultural diversity in Judaism is amazing." Added Denise Davis, an African American Jew-by-choice and member of the Be'chol Lashon advisory council, "I'm happy my daughter will grow up in a world where she's not the only brown face in Judaism."

As the event wound down, organizer Tobin felt satisfied. "This is a lesson for the Jewish community," he said. "Open the gates, lower the barriers and people will participate."

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http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-module/displaystory/story_id/22564/format/html/displaystory.html

Right-wing Orthodox activists in America have launched an initiative to bring tens of millions of so-called "lost Jews" from Asia and Europe to the West Bank.

By Steven I. Weiss

May 28, 2004

The ghetto, in what was once the American and then the International Settlement and is now called the North Bund, harbored more than 20,000 Jews who fled Nazi Europe from 1933 to 1941 and another 5,000 to 10,000 who fled Stalin's Russia before that. Viewers of Steven Spielberg's 1987 film "Empire of the Sun" got a glimpse of the area. Known in Chinese as Hongkou (or Hongkew), the ghetto was a haven for stateless refugees in a city that for years did not require a visa to enter.

Almost all the Jews, except a few descendants of mixed parentage, resettled in New York, Los Angeles, Tel Aviv and elsewhere as the Communists took power in 1949. They left behind a charming neighborhood with row houses, schools, a synagogue, a park and even a Little Vienna Cafe. The district is now inhabited by working-class Chinese, some of whom live in rooms lighted by a single hanging bulb and with three or more families sharing a kitchen and bathroom. When Shanghai officials announced urban renewal plans for the North Bund almost two years ago, they said they envisioned turning the area into a masterpiece of the 21st century, a modern business and residential district with skyscrapers, apartment buildings, cruise ship docks and even an enormous Ferris wheel.

The gleaming metropolis that city planners had in mind did not leave room for a quaint old neighborhood. Officials had earmarked about 400 historic buildings for preservation citywide, but in the old ghetto only the Ohel Moshe Synagogue and a block or so of row houses made the list.

Mr. Choa had a different idea. He and his New York-based architecture firm, HLW International, entered a competition to design a master plan for the new North Bund. HLW, along with two other firms, the Cox Group of Australia and RTKL Associates of Baltimore, won. Mr. Choa, who had already restored the Art Deco lobbies of the Park Hotel and the Peace Hotel annex, architectural jewels from the era when Shanghai was known as the Paris of the East, has experience in environmentally sensitive design. The centerpiece of his plan is creating a memorial park around the synagogue, where there are now buildings, and bringing in gravestones of Jewish residents from former cemeteries. He says his idea would symbolically link the park to the Huangpu River on one end and an ornate Buddhist temple on the other.

Yet creating the park would mean saving only a few more of the ghetto buildings than the city required, Mr. Choa said. By tearing down some of the row houses, developers, who would be chosen by the government, could build more profitable high-rises. "The choice was to keep the housing or put in a park," he said. "Park space was so underrepresented. I thought the park was more important." "I agonized a lot about what to do in this area," he added, calling the decision a "Faustian bargain." Mr. Choa said that no matter what he proposed, much of the ghetto could be torn down anyway. "There's no guarantee that even a municipal-preserved building will stay," he said. But momentum is growing to preserve the entire neighborhood. An alternate plan has been drawn up by two Canadians, Ian Leventhal and Thomas M. Rado, who are Jewish. They formed a company called Living Bridge, that is trying to raise \$450 million to preserve at least 50 ghetto buildings in a nine-block area.

Autograph Man: A Novel about Growing Up with a Jewish Mother and a Chinese Father

By Susan Katz Miller

InterfaithFamily.com

Review of *The Autograph Man*, Zadie Smith, Random House, New York, 2002, 347 pages.

Those of us who are interfaith children must navigate two cultures. We navigate externally, as we interact with a society that often mislabels or misinterprets, assumes or excludes. And we navigate internally, as we absorb and integrate or compartmentalize our two cultures. Few interfaith children have written extensively about this process. But recent literature by mixed-race children provides powerful parallels and metaphorical insights that I find relevant to interfaith children.

Zadie Smith is a young British novelist (English father, Jamaican mother) who garnered great critical acclaim for her first novel, *White Teeth*, the ambitious saga of an interracial family. For her second novel, Smith has chosen a protagonist with a Jewish mother and a Chinese (non-Jewish) father. While Smith is not Jewish, clearly her multiracial background helps her to imagine the struggles and the wry humor inherent in the life of an interfaith child. When this second novel won the 2003 *Jewish Quarterly* Literary Prize for Fiction in England, there was some backlash against the way that Smith appropriated everything Jewish, from the Kabbalah to Lenny Bruce. One British critic called her use of Jewish material "essentially inauthentic." But I found her use of Jewish characters and philosophy to be affectionate, relevant and ultimately insightful. From my point of view, Smith may not be Jewish, but she is "essentially authentic" as a voice for the intercultural.

Alex-Li Tandem identifies himself as a Jew, is educated as a Jew, and grows up with a motley crew of mainly Jewish friends (one of whom is black). In his late twenties, Alex-Li is still trying to make sense of the loss of his father, who died when Alex was twelve. He is alienated from Jewish practice, but one of his best friends is a rabbi, and another is a deeply spiritual student of the Kabbalah. His friends repeatedly rescue and try to help Alex as he takes psychedelic drugs, crashes his car and injures his girlfriend, gets repeatedly and profoundly drunk, and becomes involved with questionable, madcap business capers in his chosen profession as an autograph dealer. He is obsessed with getting the signature of an elderly and reclusive screen star named Kitty Alexander. Kitty is of Italian and Russian extraction, but "passed" for Chinese in her most famous movie.

One of Smith's themes here is celebrity as a commodity—a theme she evidently needs to work out after experiencing life as a celebrity since the publication of her first novel. A more profound theme is *tikkun olam*—repairing our broken world. Alex is still working through his father's death, trying to heal this broken part of himself, but in the process he goes crashing through his life, damaging those around him. Alex may be a bit old to be coming of age, but his behavior is annoyingly reckless and immature through most of the novel.

And yet, I empathized with Alex, and could almost understand the patience of his long-suffering friends and girlfriend. Smith's language, funny and tremendously clever, pulls the reader through a series of rather implausible plot turns. Almost all of the characters here are blessed with great comic timing, erudite word play, and a hip sensibility (even while Smith describes them as essentially a bunch of nerds and geeks).

But the most relevant quality of *The Autograph Man*, for me, was the insight Smith has into the state of dual identity, and into how this affects Alex's ambivalent relationship with Judaism. Smith tells us that Alex's "instinct was to detest grouping of all kinds—social, racial, national or political; he had never joined so much as a swimming club." Many intercultural children, whether we are interfaith or mixed race, will recognize this allergy to grouping (especially when we cannot choose our own group) and to clubs (which by definition exclude). While Smith's second novel may have disappointed some fans of *White Teeth*, it is essential reading for her insights into the reality that more and more of us are living, as children of more than one culture.

Susan Katz Miller is an "interfaith child" and a former Newsweek reporter living in the Washington, DC area. She is writing a book on raising interfaith children.

Growing Up Asian in America: Pass the Soy Sauce

By Linda Wong

Selections from Winners in the 2004 Asian Pacific Fund Art and Essay Contest

San Francisco Chronicle

5/30/04

It is six o'clock on a Friday night. All my friends are out. They are at the movies. I, however, am stuck at home, eating with my family. It isn't even Chinese New Year, a time when I know I am required to attend dinner. It is just another day, another typical Chinese dinner consisting of rice, soup, some sort of steamed greens and leftover roast duck. I do not want to be here. I want to be out with my friends. "Pass the soy sauce," I mutter grumpily. My mother shoots me an evil glance noticing my rude tone and says in her broken English, "You want, then you get yourself." As I walk to the other end of the table and grab the soy sauce, she begins her lecture about family and friends. "Family always before friends," she says. I pretend to be concentrating on mixing the soy sauce with my rice, but she knows I am listening. The rest of dinner is eaten in silence, not counting the constant clicking-clacking of chopsticks.

Once the dishes are cleared and the table is wiped, my mother announces she will take me to the movies. Although the movie is over I still want to go. "At least I'll get out of the house," I think. So, I quickly agree and we leave. When I arrive at the theater, my friends run up to greet me. I tell my mom, "I'll call later." She nods and exits the parking lot. Soon, I am laughing and talking nonstop with my friends. I completely forget about the dinner scene for the moment. I feel like a normal American teenager again. It gets darker by the minute, and everyone starts to leave. One of my friends, Stephanie, offers to bring me home. "But it's late and you don't even live near me," I protest. "So? My dad won't care anyway. Come on, we're like family," she says. Suddenly the night's dinner rushes back. "We're like family," I repeat to myself. I then accept the ride home.

At home, I continue to think about it. I realize, then, that the words "friends" and "family" are really not that different. Stephanie is my friend, and, yet, she is also family. She even said it herself, "Come on, we're like family." No, we do not eat dinner at the same table or live under the same roof, but we are so close that we act like family. My mother, on the other hand, is part of my family, but she is also my friend. And, no, she doesn't go to school with me or listen to the same music, but we are close enough that we act like friends. I come to the conclusion that when you get right down to it, real friends and true family are the same. I decide to treat both with the same attitude, the same respect. Meanwhile, I also know my mother would disagree with my theory. She would say, "What are you talking about? Friend is friend. Family is family. There is a big difference. Grandma, Grandpa, Dad, Sophia -- they are your family. You see?" My mother is very traditional. My father is the same way. They both grew up in Hong Kong with the same values. Family always wins over friends. Family equals respect. Thus, they try to instill the same value in me. I understand this, but, at the same time, I see how it is not constant. Just because someone is family doesn't mean I automatically like and respect who he or she is. No. For me, respect must be earned; it is not just given. On the other hand, a long-time friend may not be blood-related, but I may like him or her very much and have great respect for him or her. Family does not always win over friends; it depends on the family, on the friend. Sometimes, they are tied, and everyone wins. It is something that I strongly believe, whether or not my mother agrees. The next Friday, the phone rings. It is my friends asking if I want to go to the football game. "It's homecoming game though!" they say. Remembering last week's lesson, I say "No thanks," hang up, and continue setting the table. I would rather spend some time with my family anyway. Today is another typical day, another typical Chinese dinner consisting of rice, soup, some sort of steamed greens, and, this time, leftover sweet and sour pork. My mom asks about the phone call. "Who was that?"

"Just some friends." "What did they want?"

"To hang out at the football game."

"And you don't want to hang out with your friends?"

"I already am, Mom. Oh, would you please pass the soy sauce."

-- Linda Wong, 16, Piedmont Hills High School, San Jose

B'nai Mitzvah for Ethiopian Immigrants Born During Operation Solomon

JTA Email Edition

Tuesday, May 25, 2004

Ethiopian immigrants who were born during Operation Solomon became B'nai Mitzvah. Six 13-year-olds, born within the two days that the Israeli government airlifted nearly 15,000 Ethiopian refugees on May 24-25, 1991, celebrated in Jerusalem on Monday. Of the six, two actually were born on the plane.

Chief Rabbinate Releases Ethiopian Music CD

By Michael Freund
The Jerusalem Post

May 19, 2004

Sent by Michelle Stein Evers Frankl - "Has anyone any idea how to get one of these CDs?"

In an effort to reach out to the thousands of Ethiopian immigrants who have come to Israel in recent years, the Chief Rabbinate has taken the unusual step of releasing a CD with popular songs played to traditional Ethiopian melodies. The compilation, entitled "A Collection of Songs for our Brethren, the Immigrants from Ethiopia", contains 14 tracks, including tunes such as "Mashiach" and "Lecha Dodi", many of which are performed by young Ethiopian-Israeli artists.

According to Rabbi Elyahu Maimon, Director of the Chief Rabbinate's Conversion Courts, the production of the CD is aimed at "re-connecting Ethiopian immigrants to contemporary Judaism as it is practiced in Israel and preserving the very important traditions they brought with them from Ethiopia."

"Past experience, particularly from the 1950s and 60s," he added, "shows that when attempts are made to erase the old traditions of an immigrant group, it can impair their successful absorption in the country, and that is something we wish to avoid at all costs."
The music, which is available in both cassette and CD format, will be distributed by the Rabbinate to Ethiopian immigrants around the country. "We very much hope that this will help, in some small way, to improve their absorption here in the country," he said.

Letter from Baghdad: Remnants of Babylonian Jewry Endure Tyranny of the Majority

By Marina Benjamin

The Forward

May 14, 2004

The narrow, dusty streets of what was once Baghdad's thriving Jewish quarter, called Betaween, are quiet on the mild spring morning. I visited them with Emad Levy, one of the last remaining Jews in the Iraqi capital. "I am proud to be a Jew, and I tell everyone I'm Jewish. I'm not afraid of anything," he said. After a couple of days touring Baghdad in Levy's company, I realized that this is a declaration he makes often — usually in public, and usually loudly. On one occasion, we were sitting in an empty ice cream parlor in the city's Alwiya district, with the wait staff eying us suspiciously across a deserted sea of white Formica tables. Glaring directly back at them, an unapologetic Levy boomed, "I love my religion."

When we visited the ancient shrine of Joshua the Priest on the outskirts of Baghdad, Levy whipped out his yarmulke from his jacket pocket, placed it on his head and began to pray in Hebrew — rocking gently back and forth on the soles of his feet. The two Muslim elders tending the shrine were clearly mortified. They exchanged quiet words but did not ask us to leave. Afterward, Levy said, "We're supposed to be free now, so why shouldn't I openly express my faith?"

However, for all Levy's enthusiasm, since the end of the war one year ago, conditions in Iraq have worsened rather than improved. Even before the recent explosion of violence, Baghdad's tiny community of indigenous Jews, now numbering just 22 people, was feeling the strain of living in a war zone. They couldn't obtain kosher meat, something so essential to the spiritual and cultural life of any observant Jewish community. They were unable to come together to pray, and they could not properly observe funeral rites for two of their elders who died last year. Now fear has immobilized them completely. As Jews around the world celebrated Passover last month, Baghdad's Jews comforted themselves by reading their prayer books alone.

Jews have good reason to be watchful in today's Iraq. Constantly denounced in the press and on Iraqi television, now more than at any time in recent history, they have become targets of a new hard-line antisemitism not seen in Iraq since the pre-Saddam era. Fearing the kind of terrorist attack that destroyed a synagogue in Istanbul last year, the community has barricaded up its remaining synagogue indefinitely. No service has been held there in almost a year.

The tragedy of the situation is that Levy and his co-religionists are inheritors of a great legacy. The first Jews of Baghdad were the original exiles, brought out of Judea as slaves in 586 BCE to work on Babylon's irrigation canals in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar. Over the centuries the Babylonian Jewish community became the world's largest and wealthiest — the center of Jewish learning and culture, birthplace of the Talmud — ruled over until medieval times by a descendant of King David, known as the Exilarch, who was a member of Baghdad's royal court.

In more recent times, ever since the birth of the Iraqi state, Jews have figured prominently in shaping the nation's fortunes. Most famously, in 1925, a leading member of the community, Sasson Heskail, the country's first finance minister, secured the payment of Iraq's oil royalties in gold instead of cash, thus helping Iraq ride out the worst of the Great Depression.

The tide began turning against Iraq's 150,000 Jews in the 1930s, as the Arab world rose up against Zionism — and subsequently against Jews in general. It didn't matter that Baghdad's Jews shunned Zionism as a foreign ideological movement that had little to do with them. In 1941, a pro-Nazi government orchestrated anti-Jewish riots that left 200 dead and thousands injured. After the birth of Israel in 1948, more than 135,000 Jews fled an increasingly intolerant Iraq in 1950 and 1951, with little more than the clothes on their backs. It was a mass exodus — the largest human airlift operation in history.

At age 38, Emad Levy is among the younger members of the straggling community who still remain in Baghdad. Most of them are now old and frail and more inclined to dwell on the past than to nurture hopes for the future. Tawfiq Sofaer, for example, can remember a time when Jews lived among the cream of Baghdad society.

Sofaer is now 95. He has spent the past 35 years living in a cupboard-sized room under the stairs of a shabby office building in the synagogue compound. He relies on his manservant, Mohamed, to care for him, and on the community's charity. "I used to be a merchant. I had friends and family," he says. "But now I am all alone. I am too tired to go on. What can I do?"

Emad Levy does not share this defeatist spirit. He is all energy and industry. In the absence of a rabbi, he considers himself the community's spiritual leader. With Hebrew that was good enough to conduct services in the synagogue before the war, he now prays at his home and at other Jewish homes, blessing food and marking the Sabbath. He also cares for the elderly, taking food to Sofaer and to Ibrahim Shoori (another frail soul dependent on community largesse) and helping them to wash. But the bulk of his time is consumed with supervising the ongoing project of repairing and renovating Baghdad's Jewish cemetery.

Visitors to the Jewish cemetery in the turbulent Shia neighborhood of Sadr City, the scene of some of the most vicious fighting in recent weeks, have been stoned more than once by school children. But the day I visited with Levy, we were peacefully received. Like the synagogue in Betaween, the cemetery lies hidden behind towering concrete walls and can only be entered via a thick metal door. There are 3,200 graves here, lying side by side in hundreds of neat rows and, one by one, each grave is being carefully remolded in concrete. Muslim laborers who have been at work here for the past three months already have repaired roughly a quarter of the graves, and so far the Jewish community has spent 20 million Dinar (\$15,000) on the renovations.

"The cemetery has suffered more than 30 years of neglect, because in Saddam's time, we could do nothing. We couldn't even visit the graves to pay our respects to the dead," Levy explains. Under Saddam, Baghdad's Jews were not actively persecuted. Indeed, it was said that the former dictator had a soft spot for the Jews because his destitute mother was taken in by a Jewish family in Tikrit in 1937 when she was pregnant with the future dictator.

But the Jews nonetheless lived in constant fear that Saddam's regime would repeat the Ba'athist witch hunts of the 1960s, which culminated in the public hanging of nine Jews in 1969. At the time, Jews were arbitrarily arrested on trumped-up charges, deprived of their business licenses and passports; telephone lines to Jewish households were cut permanently.

For years, Levy, who is convinced that Saddam's secret police had him tailed for much of the 1980s and 1990s, was too frightened to visit his own mother's grave. Now he faithfully offers her a prayer. Pointing out the marble tablets affixed to each grave on which peoples' names and dates are engraved, he tells me that this is the only Hebrew writing publicly displayed in all of Baghdad. Some tablets are just fragments, not much bigger than postage stamps. Some bear only half a name, or just a date, and some tablets have eroded away completely. All in all, it's a meager testament to a once vibrant community that played so vital a role in building Iraq.

Outside of his duties within the community, Levy's life is somewhat in disarray. Most importantly, he has not worked in months. "I used to have a business buying and selling cars, but since the war, I've stopped it," he says. He would have me believe that this was purely a matter of choice, but Iraq's open borders have meant that cheap cars are flooding in from all over the globe, making it impossible for Levy to compete.

Still, Levy isn't too bothered by the slump in trade, as he is preparing to leave Iraq. "Once I manage to sell my house and wind up my affairs, there's nothing keeping me here. I have no future in Iraq." Levy's brother is already in Holland, and his father was airlifted to Israel by the Jewish Agency for Israel last summer. As refugees of the war, Levy's father and five other elderly Jews were free to leave Iraq. But if Levy wishes to follow suit, he will have to hurry because the window for emigration is fast closing. After the new Iraqi government assumes power this summer, Jews will no longer be classified as refugees of war.

Levy is not the only Jew desperate to leave Iraq. Farah Masri, a dentist, who lives in Baghdad's Al-whada district with her mother and brother *fi* who are both doctors — wants more than anything to make a new life for herself in England or Holland. Masri, who turns 38 this year, has lived in the same house all her life among Christian and Muslim neighbors. As a school girl in the 1970s, she recalls how many of her classmates were Jewish. She didn't stand out then. But over time, as the Jewish population steadily thinned, her awareness of being different grew. "No one likes the Jews here," she says. "I remember going to church with my neighbor one Easter, and even the priest denounced the Jews for killing Jesus."

Masri shares Levy's feeling that the Jews are better off now than they were under Saddam, because in theory, at least, they are free to practice their faith. However, the complete lack of security in post-war Iraq has generated a culture of fear that Masri can escape no more than any other Iraqi citizen. She is too afraid to visit the synagogue on her own, and she refuses to go out anywhere after dark. "I pray to my God for help," Masri said. "I have to leave. The community is very small; my mother is sick and old, life is difficult and we have no relatives here."

Despite all the obstacles facing them, Levy and Masri strongly identify as Jews. However, despite their shared struggle, they do not really identify with each other — perhaps the final defeat of

a once proud and strong community. Masri, for example, was reluctant to speak to me in Levy's presence. She complained bitterly that he never let anyone in the community talk freely to foreigners. Levy, for his part, doubted Masri's commitment to improving her life: "A lot of people say they want to go, but they change their minds at the last minute and I get into trouble because I've helped make arrangements for them. Farah, for example, will never leave without her mother."

Levy insists that he, by contrast, has the courage of his convictions and that a new life, perhaps including a wife and family, awaits him elsewhere. "I feel glad to be alive, and every day I become more faithful," he says. Who, I wonder, will lead his small ship to a safe port once he's gone?

Outreach to African, Asian Jews is music to rabbi's ears

by Joe Eskenazi

Thursday May 20, 2004

J, the Jewish news weekly of Northern California, formerly the Jewish Bulletin of Northern California

When it comes to the eclectic, no one is going to match Moshe Cotel's resume. At age 13, he penned his first symphony. After attending Juilliard, he entered into a wildly successful career as a classical composer and pianist, eventually assuming the position of chairman of composition at the Peabody Conservatory of Music at the Johns Hopkins University. So, for his next act, he became a rabbi, with an emphasis on Jewish outreach "in Uganda. . .Whenever I talk to rabbis and Jewish professionals, they tell me, "Moshe, you're naive. You want to go into the Third World and make converts? We have a hard enough time keeping Jews in America Jewish." said Cotel in a phone interview from his Manhattan home. But, he added, "I see a tidal wave of conversions to Judaism in this century. In 100 years, I see one face out of every three Jews in the world being African or Asian." Cotel came to the Bay Area this week to perform his "Chronicles" - a unique blend of rabbinical wisdom and piano pieces by Bach, Mozart, Gershwin and others - at Tiburon's Congregation Kol Shofar. He will perform at San Francisco's Congregation Emanu-El on Sunday afternoon, May 23, and at Los Altos Hills, Congregation Beth Am later that evening. Then he's back on a redeye flight to New York where he'll lead Shavuot services at Brooklyn's Conservative Temple Beth El, where he is the spiritual leader.

Cotel, 61, is living the busy life of a pianist and pulpit rabbi, but nothing gets him talking like his work with Kulanu, a volunteer organization dedicated to outreach for Jewish communities in Africa and Asia. In 2002, Cotel traveled to Uganda with Conservative rabbis in a visit to the Abayudaya (literally "People of Judah") who converted to Judaism en masse in 1919. Under Idi Amin, the African Jews were brutally persecuted, and perhaps 320 of their original 3,000 members remain. Though not yet an ordained rabbi, Cotel served in abeit din that helped to convert the Abayudaya to Conservative Judaism. Incidentally, Abayudaya leader Gershon Sizomu is currently a first-year rabbinical student at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, where he caught an L.A. performance of Cotel's "Chronicles." Cotel predicts a cavalcade of Third World converts because the story of Exodus resonates so powerfully with those in less-developed civilizations. He disdains what he refers to as "street-corner evangelizing," believing spreading the word of Judaism in developing countries is as simple as opening the door for people clamoring to get in. But he thinks many in the organized Jewish community, both in America and Israel, are uncomfortable with the notion of black, brown and Asian Jews.

"Frankly, there's a certain racism involved. People are not the right complexion, not from the right socioeconomic bracket and might be seen as a drain on Jewish resources," he said. "I see it the other way around. Judaism is a universal religion. There's so much they can give to us so we can revivify our connection to Judaism."

Cotel is particularly critical of those who would write off Third World Jews as simplistic and illiterate in Jewish tradition and culture. Not so, he says. Shabbat services among the Abayudaya remind him of Conservative services at home - except instead of Hebrew and English they are in Hebrew and Luganda. "These are not ignorant people. They are poor, yes, but not ignorant. Growing up in Uganda, a country that has about 80 languages, you need to speak a dozen of them. And now they're adding Hebrew."

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Anousim Returnees - Endorsement of CRC Av Beth Din

Sent by Yaffah Batya Da Costa

Anousim Coordinator for Kulanu

Shalom Bechol Lashon,

Hope this letter finds everyone to be well and in good health/spirits. Here is the text of a letter (on the CRC Beth Din letterhead) from Rav Gedalia Schwartz:

Dear Ms DaCosta,

This note is in support of your efforts in aiding those descended from the "anusim" or conversos to find their way back to the Jewish people. The late Rav Aaron Soloveitchik, O.B.M. and Harav Mordechai Eliyahu, the former Rishon L'tzion of Israel have already endorsed the efforts of those who help the "anusim" return to their Jewish roots. Each case must be investigated on its own merits and not be treated as an ordinary situation of regular conversion. Rather in cases where there is doubt although the giyur procedure must be followed, nevertheless the certificate will state that the applicant has gone through the giyur process in returning to the ways of his Jewish ancestors. I wish you every success in bringing back the conversos to the religion of their forefathers.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz

Av Beth Din

With this letter I'm now able to connect with Orthodox Rabbis around the country (who are associated with the Rabbinical Council of America, basically OU Rabbis) on behalf of people in their local areas who have "strong evidences" of Crypto-Judaism in their matrilineal line. Rav Schwartz has offered to write an "endorsement letter" for the return certificate of any local Beth Din of which he approves (from Rabbis who are connected to the RCA). I'm currently working with about 15 individuals/families around the USA (also Peru and Mexico) who have this ancestry and are seeking a formal halachic "return" as Sephardim in the Orthodox world. And once this letter is published in the proper circles, this number (of active returnees) will increase greatly.

REJOICE WITH ME ONE AND ALL ... BARUCH HASHEM !!! The Jewish Agency just TODAY has approved my ALIYAH to Israel ... G-d willing (and nothing else gets in the way) I'll be on a Nefesh B'Nefesh plane ride (one way ticket) to Israel on August 3rd, 2004. I can't thank you ENOUGH for all the prayers and wishes for success from everyone. Keep me in your thoughts as I get serious now about going thru all my stuff and unloading anything I really don't need (for the rest of my life) to lighting the shipment to Israel (and thus save costs). I have a little less than 90 days --- hope I can DO IT. I want to get an apartment with lots of room for sleep overs of guests (it is such an important MITZVAH to extend hospitality to guests in the Land of Holiness). Please keep that in your prayers for me as well.

Bracha v'hatzlacha rabbah (Blessing and Much Success)

Wondering How to Reach Young Jews? Online Venture Opts to Try a Magazine

By Joe Berkofsky

May 25, 2004

JTA

For years, young Jews have voted with their feet after their Bar or Bat Mitzvahs, with about half of those in non-Orthodox synagogues' religious schools leaving before the 12th-grade confirmation. Some synagogue schools are starting new, nontraditional programs to bring teenagers back to tradition, but one media company thinks all they need is a good magazine. Despite declining Jewish ties among young Jews and the financial risks of magazine startups, Jewish Family & Life Media, a non-profit organization based in Newton, Mass., is launching a print version of its Web site "Jvibe," which is aimed at Jewish teenagers between 13 and 16 years old.

"Jvibe is supposed to help kids maintain a Jewish connection with the community, post-Bar Mitzvah, through pop culture, by weaving in Jewish values and morals," says Stewart Bromberg, the group's director of development. A year ago, Jewish Family got a \$125,000 grant from the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund of San Francisco to do market research on these teenagers to figure out what they thought about Jvibe. The same fund gave \$75,000 to help bankroll Jvibe in the heady dot-com days of 1998. At a time when teens hardly are considered people of the book, a series of focus groups conducted over the past year revealed a surprise.

"What came out is that they wanted a magazine, something portable so they could share it with friends, read it on the bus or in bed at night," Bromberg says. That comes as other publications backed with private money or public funding have struggled to find an audience.

In the late 1980s, the San Francisco-based magazine Davka, which featured Jews with tattoos, provocative articles and beat poetry, folded after a few issues -- though it did give birth to the term "Generation J" to describe young, alienated Jews. A more recent survivor is Heeb, a magazine aimed at hipster Jews in their 20s and 30s -- though its circulation has been less impressive than the media coverage it received. Now a group of young Jewish philanthropists in Los Angeles, the Jewish Venture Philanthropy Fund, has awarded Jewish Family \$125,000 to redesign Jvibe's Web site and launch a print version as a pilot program.

The Web site currently attracts 20,000 to 25,000 visitors a month, but Bromberg says the new online version will be linked thematically to the magazine. The magazine will include advertising and features such as a CD-ordering club. In the eyes of Jewish teens, the ads "legitimize" the publication, he says. The 32-page Jvibe magazine will have an initial print run of 17,000, distributed free to young Jews in the greater Los Angeles area, who account for 5 percent of the "target market" of post-Bar Mitzvah dropouts, Bromberg says. The plan is to publish six times per year, with updates and added features going online, he says. Planned content includes a celebrity column about Israeli pop guitarist Evan Taubentfeld, who plays with Canadian pop star Avril Lavigne; what movies to watch after a break-up; and a teen philanthropy page sponsored by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. Jvibe "seeks to create relevant and entertaining content that inspires a connection between Jewish teens and the Jewish community," Bromberg says.

Beyond what Cosby said

Theodore M. Shaw

Tuesday, June 1, 2004

San Francisco Chronicle

Bill Cosby is a beloved icon. So it gave me no pleasure to follow him to the stage at Constitution Hall on May 17, the 50th anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education, after listening to his remarks.

For his philanthropy toward institutions that have worked on behalf of African Americans, Cosby was being honored by the three institutions, including the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, that share responsibility for winning the U.S. Supreme Court decision that broke the back of American apartheid. In his acceptance remarks, however, Cosby told the well-heeled, black-tie audience that "the lower economic people are not holding up their end in this deal."

Unlike the story of Brown, Cosby suggested, this was not about what white people are doing to us; it was about what black people are failing to do for themselves. His remarks excoriated poor black people for their failure to actively raise their children, to teach "knuckleheads" proper English and for spending hundreds of dollars for sneakers while refusing to spend \$200 for the educational package "Hooked on Phonics." Cosby also spoke of "people getting shot in the back of the head (for stealing) a piece of pound cake, and then we run out and we are outraged." He wondered why more people from these communities were not incarcerated. "God is tired of you," he quipped, "and so am I."

I knew, even before I reached the stage, that Cosby's comments would be hijacked by those who pretend that racism is no longer an issue and who view poor black people with disdain. So, departing from my own prepared remarks, I embraced the notion of personal responsibility, at the same time calling attention to problems faced by African Americans that are not self-inflicted.

One example is the now infamous Tulia, Texas, drug sting. With no drugs, no money and no weapons recovered, 10 percent of the black population of this small town was arrested and convicted on the word of one corrupt undercover police officer. The sentences ranged from 20 to 341 years. Only after the Legal Defense Fund and other lawyers represented these individuals in post-conviction proceedings were they released.

Predictably, conservatives are applauding Bill Cosby for saying that the problems of the black community stem primarily from personal failures and moral shortcomings. But just as we in the progressive African American community cannot countenance the demonization of poor people, we must not cede the issue of personal responsibility to ideological conservatives. Most poor black people struggle admirably to raise their children well. Parents, including single mothers, work for low wages, sometimes in multiple jobs, to support their families. Recently, Cosby recognized this in a press statement in which he emphasized that he was not criticizing everyone in the "black lower economic classes" but intended to issue a "call to action" and to foster "a sense of shared responsibility and action."

Unlike much of the world, we ignore human-rights protections against discrimination on the basis of economic status. As a nation, we wage war on poor people in this country, not on poverty. In many ways we are a nation struggling to maintain our moral compass. Violence and dysfunction in poor black communities are under an especially glaring spotlight. But many of the problems Cosby addressed are largely a function of concentrated poverty in black communities -- the legacy of centuries of governmental and private neglect and discrimination.

Cosby's observations about the senseless violence perpetrated within black communities are undeniable. I do not know anyone who does not condemn it. But Amadou Diallo, shot to death in a hail of bullets by New York police, did not steal a pound cake. He and countless other innocent black people have been killed while unarmed in communities in which policing is driven almost entirely by a "war on drugs" that makes all residents presumptive targets.

Following a recent conversation, Cosby and I agreed on this much: To the extent that he is frustrated and angry about the failure of people to be responsible parents, and about senseless crime and violence, I stand with him; to the extent that we continue to be challenged by the systemic issues of race and racism that the Legal Defense Fund has confronted since the days of my predecessor, Thurgood Marshall, Bill Cosby stands with me.

There is no either/or for anyone who truly works in the interests of African Americans and our nation.

Theodore M. Shaw is director-counsel and president of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund Inc. This commentary originally appeared in the Washington Post.

Long after World War II, black battalion gets its due

Jim Herron Zamora

Sunday, May 30, 2004

San Francisco Chronicle

When Floyd Dade's daughter was preparing a high school report on World War II, she read that black soldiers didn't serve in combat but were relegated to supply and support units. "I almost fell out of my chair when I heard that," said Dade, who served in a Sherman tank during the heaviest fighting in Western Europe in World War II. "I'm living proof that whatever she read was wrong." The anecdote shows the plight of World War II veterans, particularly those who served in African American combat units such as the 761st Tank Battalion.

Unlike their more celebrated white counterparts, the exploits of the black soldiers of WWII are less known -- sometimes even within their own families. "A lot of people forgot us or never knew we existed," said Dade, a retired chief custodian at the San Francisco Unified School District. "There aren't many of us left to tell our stories." Dade, who celebrated his 80th birthday Saturday in Vallejo with some World War II comrades who visited for the Memorial Day weekend, hopes to get a few more chances to tell the story of the 761st, the first black armored unit.

They waited six decades, but the heroes of the tank battalion are finally getting their 15 minutes of fame, largely because basketball great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar recently co-authored a book about the unit's exploits. Nicknamed "The Black Panthers," they helped Gen. George Patton's 3rd Army liberate France, then broke through German lines in Belgium, turned back a counterattack in Belgium, pushed through Bavaria and liberated two concentration camps in Austria. "We were just a bunch of kids with nothing to lose except our lives," said L.Z. Anderson, 84, of Pacifica who drove a bus for the San Francisco Municipal Railway for 30 years after operating a tank in the Battle of the Bulge. "We fought like hell, because everyone expected us to fail. Our own generals thought we were disposable troops, but we never believed that ourselves."

Dade and Anderson are among about 40 surviving 761st members nationwide; just a decade ago, there were more than 100. The battalion produced a recipient of the Medal of Honor -- Ruben Rivers -- as well as many other decorated soldiers. Working in five-man crews in 32-ton Sherman M4 medium tanks equipped with a 76mm cannon and three mounted machine guns, the battalion fought for 183 days continuously until the war ended -- a record for American units in WWII. More than 250 of its 712 members were killed or wounded.

But like the better-known Tuskegee Airmen, the 761st was not supposed to be a combat unit. "The 761st was never intended to see battle," wrote Abdul-Jabbar, who became fascinated with the unit after learning that a childhood role model, family friend Leonard "Smitty" Smith, was a member. "As with many African American units at the time, they trained mainly as a public relations gesture to sustain the support of the black community during the war. However, the Allies were so desperate for trained tank personnel in the summer of 1944 that even though Gen. Patton initially opposed their deployment, they were called upon to fight."

Most African American units in the Army, which was segregated, were restricted to support tasks such as cooking, loading trucks, building bridges and burying the dead. That began to change in 1942, when blacks were trained to fly planes and drive tanks. The 761st assembled men from 30 states and Washington, D.C., first at Camp Claiborne, La., then at Fort Hood, Texas, where they trained for two years before being deployed.

The discrimination encountered within the Army was overshadowed by the outright hostility the young black soldiers faced off the base. "They hated us," said Anderson, a native of Idabel, Okla. "We weren't very welcome anywhere in town. The last thing they wanted to see was a bunch of young black men. If we didn't travel in a big group, the local guys would always pick a fight with us." "I'm glad we saved all our anger for the Germans," said Dade, who grew up in Texarkana before he was drafted. "We had a lot of it."

At Fort Hood, a young lieutenant fresh out of UCLA in the 761st was nearly court-martialed for refusing to move to the back of a bus. His commander refused to approve the court-martial, but the lieutenant was transferred to another unit and never saw combat. He missed his chance to be a war hero. But the man -- Jackie Robinson -- became a household name a few years later as the first black player in Major League Baseball.

Because of a combination of lobbying by the NAACP and the Army's heavy casualties among tank units, the 761st finally was deployed to France in the fall of 1944. "We were a bastard battalion" that was attached at various times to different units in Patton's 3rd Army, Dade said. "But we were never permanently attached anywhere. Everyone needed us, but no one wanted us."

Patton set the tone when he greeted the 761st on Nov. 1, 1944, in a muddy field outside Nancy, France. "Men, you're the first Negro tankers to ever fight in the American Army. I would never have asked for you if you weren't good. I have nothing but the best in my Army. I don't care what color you are as long as you go up there and kill those Kraut sonsabitches. Everyone has their eyes on you and is expecting great things from you. Most of all, your race is looking forward to you. Don't let them down, and damn you, don't let me down!" said Patton, according to "Come Out Fighting," a 1945 official military history of the battalion by Trezzvant Anderson.

Patton put the Black Panthers directly into combat near Morville, France, and did not let them have a day off until they linked up with Russian allies coming from the east near Steyr, Austria, on May 5, 1945. "It seemed to me that we were put in suicide missions," Dade said. "We weren't supposed to come back alive. Patton didn't expect us to last more than a couple days. Well, we kept fighting on the front line for six months." Anderson added: "We only got a break because the Germans surrendered."

Dade and Anderson were interviewed separately but inevitably described some of the same incidents: a six-hour firefight with Panzers in the snow at the Belgian village of Tillet; American bodies piled along a road outside Bastogne; the waist-deep mud in the Saar region. Then there were the concentration camps. Dade participated in the liberation of Gunskirchen, a sub-camp of the larger Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. "At first, we thought it was a German military camp" that had just been abandoned, Dade said. "Then we saw all these people in stripes. They were nothing but skin and bones. Some of them died, because we gave them food and their stomachs started to hemorrhage because their stomachs were so tender." Anderson holds no grudges against the Germans. In fact, his daughter married a German citizen. But he remains angry about the racism he experienced. And he wishes he could drive a tank just one more time. "After dodging German artillery, even the worst Muni route was a piece of cake," Anderson said with a laugh.

Recognition came slowly. In 1978, the 761st Tank Battalion received a Presidential Unit Citation. In 1997, 53 years after giving his life on the battlefield, Staff Sgt. Rivers, whose family settled in the East Bay, was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. Dade proved his daughter's teacher wrong in 1984, when she showed her class a yellowing copy of the Stars & Stripes newspaper from Nov. 27, 1944. A front-page photograph showed Dade sitting in his Sherman tank after the 761st captured Guebling, a town near the French-German border. The paper's banner headline: "Negro Tankers Cut Path for Third Army." The incident also spurred Dade to participate in many events in the late 1980s and early 1990s that commemorated the war and the Holocaust. He has spoken to many Jewish groups about the horrors he witnessed at the concentration camps. But Dade, who has six children and 12 grandchildren, said he accepts that

younger generations may not be interested in history. "It's one thing to ignore us," Dade said. "But don't ever deny us. We did what we did. We made a difference in the world's biggest war. That'll still be a fact even after we're all gone."

Gay Marriage: Is it a Fights for Equal Rights or the End of a Moral Society?

By Julie Gruenbaum
The LA Jewish Journal
May 14, 2004
Sent by Davi Cheng

...At the heart of the debate is an intertwining of the social, religious and legal fibers that combine to form marriage and questions regarding to what extent those fibers can or should be untangled. Opponents of same-sex marriage say that trying to separate the spiritual and legal definitions of marriage is a disingenuous exercise, since marriage is defined by a society that bases itself on moral, and very often religious-based, values and uses those values to decide who will reap the benefits of society.

..."We are dangerously overlapping church and state in the whole legal marriage discussion," said Rabbi Lisa Edwards, leader of Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC) on Pico Boulevard, which was the world's first gay and lesbian synagogue. "I do think that God needs to be part of the conversation within the Jewish community and other religious communities, but I don't think God ought to be part of the larger legal, public discussion." Bringing religion in obscures the basic civil rights issue that is at the heart of this, advocates say.

"This movement for gay marriages is plain and simple about helping families protect themselves, using the mechanisms our society has created to protect families and to protect partners in loving relationships, and to have them live up to the rights and responsibilities that go along with that," said Rabbi Denise Eger, rabbi of Kol Ami, West Hollywood's Reform Synagogue, and a member of the steering committee of the California Freedom to Marry Coalition. But many fear the consequences of taking God out of foundational societal mores.

"A godless society is not a healthy society," Korobkin said. "It may be functional, but if there is no larger cause that unifies the people and calls them to a higher moral standard, then that society is doomed to a short-lived and amoral tenure." One idea being floated is taking the state out of the marriage business altogether. The state would offer civil unions to everyone — gay and straight couples — and leave the sanctification to religious bodies. "It makes sense to me to get city hall out of the marriage business and put that squarely in the hands of the religious leaders," said Rabbi Steve Greenberg, an Orthodox rabbi who came out of the closet a few years ago. "The advantage of this approach is that nobody uses civil marriage as a bully pulpit to force one religious view of marriage or another on the larger body politic."

But gay couples acknowledge — and opponents are quick to agree — that it is both an emotion and legal challenge to make that separation. The bestowal of the hundreds of legal rights and protections that go along with the word "marriage" signifies a societal acceptance that is an equally, if not more, important goal of the movement to legalize same-gender marriage. "My parents have this piece of paper, and we wanted to have the same piece of paper and have the same experience," says Bracha Yael, holding up the framed marriage license she and her partner of 24 years, Davi Cheng, signed in San Francisco in February. "For me it confirms that our relationship is equal; that my parents' relationship is not somehow greater than ours."

It is only in the last seven or eight years that Cheng and Yael have lived openly and proudly as lesbians. In 1998, they had a Jewish wedding at BCC, with many friends and almost no family members. "There has been this tremendous arc in our relationship, from being fully closeted, where no one had to tell us we were less than, because we already thought we were less than, through these trials and tribulations to the other side, where we're equal within society, but mainly within ourselves," said Yael, a contractor. When they announced they had gotten married, even Cheng's "Rush Limbaugh Republican" colleague cried and hugged her.

It is just that kind of validation and acceptance of facts on the ground that opponents don't want to see, that they say can lead to the slippery slope of a society with no moral foothold. "I don't want children to start thinking at the age of 7, when somebody says, 'Who are you going to marry?' Well, maybe it will be Johnny or maybe it will be Jennifer," said Dennis Prager, the conservative KRLA radio talk show host who debated same-sex marriage at the University of Judaism on May 12 with Greenberg and others. He argues that the question of same-sex marriage has nothing to do with civil rights, since, just like anyone else, gays are permitted to marry members of the opposite sex.

Prager said that society does and should define the terms of who can marry — such as prohibitions on brothers and sisters marrying each other or polygamy. "Utah was banned from admission to the union until it prohibited polygamy. Why was that not anti-Mormon or violating the rights of Mormons?" Prager asks. Prager said his issue is not with gays who want to be in relationships, it is with those who want to make those relationships equal to heterosexual marriage. "Everybody has a line they draw, and the burden of argument is on those who wish to redefine an institution that has had only one meaning in the history of civilization," Prager said.

...The questions of same-sex commitment ceremonies and ordaining gay and lesbian rabbis are currently before the movement's influential Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. By next March, the committee will consider teshuvot (halachic treatises) prepared by its members and most likely will ultimately validate several positions. Conservative rabbis will be free to choose which to follow. Rabbi Elliot Dorff, rector and professor of philosophy at the University of Judaism, is vice chair of the law committee and had been slated to become its chairman last year. But because his views are clearly on the left on this issue — he advocates full equality — the committee deferred his chairmanship until the question has been decided.

Dorff believes it is clear that gays do not choose to be gay and cannot become straight and that society has an interest in seeing loving, stable, monogamous relationships. With those factors motivating his study, Dorff believes it is imperative to narrow down the interpretation of the verses in Leviticus prohibiting male-male sex.

"I am not in any way shape or form trying to ignore the verses or change them by takanah [rabbinic decree]. All I am doing is saying that we should understand those verses differently from our ancestors, who understood them to prohibit all homosexual sex. We should understand them to prohibit only promiscuous, oppressive or cultic sex, but loving monogamous homosexual sex would be outside of those verses and would be something we want to sanctify," Dorff said. Whether or not Dorff's opinion will prevail, it is clear that within both American society and the Jewish community, the terms of the conversation have changed. Gays who once would have been thrilled with civil unions are now pushing for full marriage.

And some who might never have considered civil unions are now open to it. Korobkin, the Orthodox rabbi from Hancock Park who is firmly against gay marriage, not only believes the Orthodox community should be more tolerant and sensitive to gays, but he is open to the idea of giving loving partners legal status other than marriage to afford them rights and protections. "If two people have committed themselves to each other as partners, they should have a right to designate another person of whatever gender as the primary caregiver or life partner, and I think that person should have special privileges," he said. "I think it would be a callous society that would deny a homosexual the comfort and consolation of his life partner."

For complete article: <http://www.jewishjournal.com/home/searchview.php?id=12243>

Remembering Armenia

Anne G. Eshoo
San Francisco Chronicle
Thursday, May 27, 2004

Serbia, Rwanda and the Jewish Holocaust stand as stark reminders in the American psyche of the brutality humankind is capable of committing against itself. But many Americans are not aware that these atrocities were preceded by another, equally horrendous act of barbarity against the Armenian people.

Eighty-nine years ago, in 1915, the Ottoman Empire began rounding up hundreds of Armenian leaders and putting them to death, a process that eventually killed 1.5 million Armenian men, women and children through forced death marches, mass burnings, rape and starvation. Another half million were forced into exile. It was the 20th century's first genocide, and it served as a prototype for future genocides. In justifying his regime's policies two decades later, Adolf Hitler was heard to say "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Today, the 50,000 Armenian Americans in the Bay Area and others around the world are speaking out about this tragedy. Most are the children and grandchildren of those who survived the genocide, haunted by their loss and determined that not only will this crime never be forgotten, but that it never happens again.

But "never again" is a phrase that we have uttered too many times over the past century, whether in the bleak landscape of a German concentration camp, the killing fields of Cambodia, or the red clay hills of Rwanda. Too often it seems, the world's collective horror arrives too late, its sympathy tainted by the failure to act sooner, to act decisively. Our moral determination has seldom been matched by our political willingness to act.

Fortunately, history is not destiny. The African nation of Sudan is enduring violence that many believe could lead to genocide. The international community must be firmly united in demanding that both sides in this conflict allow full access by humanitarian aid organizations and the United Nations to the more than 1 million people at risk. If the killing is stopped, history shows that the Sudanese can survive the scarring of genocide, a crime that strikes not just a people, but a culture, language and history as well.

But the history of Armenia demonstrates that the healing process can take generations. Today, Armenia has a democratically elected government with strong ties to the United States. Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Armenia has the potential to make tremendous strides in improving the quality of life for all its citizens. But regrettably, Armenia's economic development is hindered by continuing conflicts with Azerbaijan and Turkey, who blockade most of Armenia's borders, forcing all international trade to be delivered by air or to travel overland via Georgia and Iran. The United States has repeatedly affirmed its commitment to the people of Armenia and their country's security and development. U.S. technical and developmental assistance is an essential component of this effort and one I'm proud to support.

Ten years ago, the world stood aside while the killers in Rwanda implored their supporters to push on, declaring that "the graves are not yet full." Today, we stand with our brothers and sisters in Armenia, Rwanda, Cambodia and Europe in our shared resolve that the horrors of genocide not be inflicted on another generation in Sudan. The graves are, indeed, too full. It's our responsibility as survivors and descendants of survivors to ensure that they are never filled again.

Rep. Anna G. Eshoo, D-Atherton, represents the 14th Congressional District. Of Armenian and Assyrian descent, she is a member of the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues.

Micro-credit Brings Macro-benefits

Madeleine K. Albright, John Doerr
San Francisco Chronicle

Thursday, May 27, 2004

In an era of heightened concern about global security, we would do well to look at one of the root causes of instability in developing nations. The lack of access to opportunity and capital among the world's poor often gives rise to hopelessness and despair, which foments social unrest. True peace and security will not be possible as long as 2 of every 10 people on the planet are unable to meet basic human needs. America is the world's leading nation because we have historically been willing to take on the hardest jobs. Fighting world poverty is undoubtedly a daunting task, but it is very much in our interest, and it can be done. Eliminating poverty is not quixotic; it is the possible, not the impossible, dream.

A powerful instrument for realizing that dream is micro-credit -- small loans to help start a simple business. These are a proven tool for transforming suffering into hope, one individual at a time. As U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has urged, "We must look seriously at the pivotal role that sustainable micro-finance can play and is playing in" helping the poorest of the poor. Micro-credit unleashes the entrepreneurial spirit. Simply to survive, the poor rely on their own ingenuity. When given an opportunity to succeed, they do it with a determination to break the vicious cycle of misery that was their inheritance. With loans as modest as \$50, women in Bangladesh have started small businesses such as dressmaking, weaving or farming that help lift them and their families out of poverty.

Coincidentally, the poor have proved to be an excellent credit risk. Over the past 2 1/2 decades, the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh has made more than \$4 billion in loans averaging less than \$200, and has a loan repayment rate greater than 98 percent. In addition to the life-changing impact on individuals and families, micro-credit has macro-economic benefits. When combined with information and communication technologies, micro-credit can unleash new opportunities for the world's poorest entrepreneurs and thereby revitalize the village economies they serve.

Grameen Bank founder Muhammad Yunus launched one of the largest telecommunications companies in South Asia with more than a million subscribers. What is most remarkable is that 50,000 of the subscribers are Grameen Bank borrowers who have taken a micro-loan and gone into business providing telephone services on a per-minute basis to customers in rural villages. A second project is now underway in Uganda in a partnership between Grameen Foundation USA and MTN Uganda to provide opportunities for the impoverished to become phone operators. The goal is to deploy 5,000 village phones over the next five years. Based on the success of Grameen Bank, the Grameen Foundation USA in Washington was established to accelerate the growth of programs around the world that are working to replicate it.

Grameen Foundation USA has partnered with more than 45 micro-credit institutions in nearly 20 countries to help them overcome the constraints to growth. Like any smart investor, this organization seeks out opportunities with the highest potential to benefit the greatest number of people. In the next five years, it hopes to reach 5 million new borrowers. The return on these investments reaches far beyond the financial benefits; we are also rewarded with social progress and a safer, more secure world. By partnering with organizations like Grameen Foundation USA, philanthropists, social investors and governments can support the global growth of micro-finance. Yunus has a compelling vision. He calls on us all to bring opportunity and technology to the destitute so we can "put poverty in the museum where it belongs." It is hard to conceive of a worthier goal or a more important one for the future of us all.

Madeleine K. Albright was the U.S. secretary of state from 1997 to 2001. She previously served as the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations. John Doerr is a venture capitalist with the Bay Area firm of Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers. He has 23 years of experience investing in technology companies.

Vatican-sponsored interfaith conference

May 31, 2004

JTA

A Vatican-sponsored interfaith conference ended with disagreement over whether Jews should take part next year. A speaker delivering an address on behalf of the emir of Kuwait opened the conference in Qatar on May 27 by saying that Jewish representatives should be invited. But the mufti of Gaza and a Syrian representative disagreed, saying that dialogue with Jewish leaders is impossible before the Palestinians get a state.

Facing deadline for constitution, E.U. debates Christian reference

By Philip Carmel PARIS

May 31, 2004

JTA

Faith may have the ability to move mountains, but it's not clear if it will be strong enough to budge politicians. With a deadline approaching to set the E.U. Constitution, a number of staunchly Christian European states are making one last attempt to insert a reference to Christianity. In a May 21 letter to the E.U.'s Irish presidency, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, the Czech Republic and Slovakia wrote that recognition of the Christian roots of Europe "remains a priority for our governments as well as for millions of European citizens. We therefore propose to pay further attention to a reference to the Christian roots of Europe in the existing text of the preamble." Ireland also favors including a reference to Christianity in the constitution, while Greece and Slovenia have said they would welcome the idea. The proposal also is backed by European Commission President Romano Prodi -- and, not surprisingly, by the Vatican, which is not an E.U. member. The new moves are a source of concern for Jewish leaders, who note the failure last year of an attempt to insert a reference to the "Judeo-Christian" nature of European history by the center-right Christian Democrat grouping in the European Parliament. The need for agreement on the constitution is especially pressing given the European summit -- set for June 16 and 17 in Brussels -- that is supposed to finalize the document. In the initial draft to the constitution's preamble -- prepared by former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing last year after months of discussion -- the text included a reference to the "cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe," but omitted Christianity and God. The draft proved problematic for many Catholic countries in the union, which at the time had only 15 members. Since another 10 countries joined the union May 1 -- including traditionally Catholic countries from the former Soviet bloc -- opposition has grown to the secular character of Giscard's constitution. Italy and Poland have been the principal instigators in recent moves to include a Christian reference. In its own national constitution, Poland refers to "both those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty, as well as those not sharing such faith but respecting those universal values from other sources." Such pressure from the new states has worried the largely Protestant states of northern Europe, as well as those with rigidly secularist traditions such as France and Belgium. One of the first to come out strongly against a Christian reference was Britain. "If we were to go down the road of making specific references to one religious tradition, we have to bear in mind other specific religions and references to them as well," British Foreign Minister Jack Straw said at a recent meeting of E.U. foreign ministers. Roger Cukierman, vice president of the European Jewish Congress and head of the CRIF umbrella organization of French Jewry, said Jews would "prefer no reference to religion at all, particularly if what was on offer ignored the Jewish contribution to European civilization." "Jews have traditionally been strong supporters of the secular state," Cukierman told JTA. But even in Cukierman's France -- which has the continent's largest Jewish community, but is perhaps the strongest bastion of European secularism -- once-total opposition to a religious reference appears to be breaking down. Meeting last week in Dublin with his Irish counterpart Bertie Ahern, Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said France was "not hostile" to an inclusion of Christian references in the preamble -- even if, he said, the current text appeared "reasonable and balanced." "I understand both points of view. Now we have to find a compromise," Ahern reportedly said. France's wavering probably owes more to political concerns than to a sudden surge of Christian faith. With elections to the European Parliament set for mid-June, center-right parties such as Raffarin's are aware of the threat from parties that push a strongly traditionalist, and sometimes extremist, perspective on the new Europe. Spain's recent change of government has pushed it into the secular camp, but other European governments increasingly are worried by far-right parties utilizing Europe's Christian heritage to gain votes in the upcoming elections. In France, in particular, much of that threat comes from Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front. But the governing UMP Party also faces a challenge from two "sovereignist" lists that call for slowing down European integration. All those parties also have rigorously opposed plans that envision adding Turkey to a future E.U. A principal plank of their opposition has been Turkey's non-Christian character. The Vatican also has not given up on providing a Christian reference in the constitution. Welcoming the entry of the 10 new countries to the union on May 1, Pope John Paul II said that "Europe should conserve and re-discover its Christian roots in order to be prepared for the great challenges of the Third Millennium." As the deadline for finalizing a constitution approaches, the Vatican just might get its wish.

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