

# JERUSALEM VIEWPOINTS

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## THE JEWS OF JAPAN

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### Jews in Japan

No one — apart perhaps from a few Japanese who see themselves as descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel — would think of Japan as in any sense a Jewish homeland. Yet among the many shrines and temples, Shinto and Buddhist, there stand occasional monuments to Jewish commitment and endeavor. As ever, this is part of a heritage in which hope and despair, longing and sacrifice, war and struggle, have all been mingled together.

Certainly this is true of Tokyo, whose Jewish community rose improbably out of the ashes of Allied victory. Probably there were more Jews in Japan during the postwar American Occupation than at any other time in the country's long history. Although the Occupation ended in 1952, an American military presence persists, with armed forces based in Okinawa

as well as at other facilities. As a result, American Jews, both men and women, remain in Japan, able to take part in Jewish life if they wish to do so. At Yokosuka naval base near Tokyo, for instance, there is a small "chapel," complete with Torah scroll, which is used on the High Holy Days and on other occasions. It would not be surprising if on these days the number of Jews worshiping at American military facilities were comparable to the numbers taking part in services at Japan's two synagogues, in the capital, Tokyo, and in western Japan (Kansai) in the port city of Kobe.

Although Japan may be regarded as quite removed from Jewish life, the country has had its own rich Jewish history. Here can be glimpsed distinctive Jewish values as well as significant and unique ties to the wider Japanese society. At present, the Tokyo and Kobe

Jewish communities make it possible for Jews of many different backgrounds — teachers of English, visiting business people, itinerant students and travelers, Israeli jewelry dealers, American tourists — to observe festivals and holidays, to keep the Sabbath, and to preserve their ties to the community, their faith, and one another.

#### **Origins: Nagasaki and Yokohama**

Although Jewish travelers are known to have entered Japan with Portuguese and Dutch merchants as early as the sixteenth century, Jews did not permanently settle in Japan until after Commodore Perry's arrival there in 1853. The first Jewish settler came to Yokohama — near Tokyo — in 1861. The earliest Jewish tombstone dates from only four years later. By 1895 this community, which developed to about 50 families, was able to dedicate Japan's first synagogue. While the community was never large, the foreigners' cemetery in Yokohama exhibits its diversity through tombstones etched in Hebrew, German, French, Russian, German, and Japanese.

Jews also settled in Nagasaki during the 1880s. As a significant Japanese port, the city was more accessible to Jews fleeing from Russian pogroms.

seph Trumpeldor, who lost an arm during the Russo-Japanese War and was later to become one of the genuine heroes of the Zionist movement for his role in the formation of the Jewish defense forces in Palestine.

The great earthquake of 1923 that destroyed most of Tokyo had a major effect on Jewish life in Japan as well. Until that time the most active Jewish community in Japan was in Yokohama. Following the earthquake the community moved to Kobe, which then had about 50 families.

#### **Kobe and Tokyo**

During the early to middle 1900s, the Kobe community was composed largely of Jews from Russia, the Middle East, and Germany. In most cases, the Russian Jews had arrived in Japan via the Manchurian city of Harbin, which had three

Capital only became an important center of Jewish life with the arrival of the American Jewish servicemen. From the postwar period through to the present, small numbers of Jews regularly arrive from the United States and Western Europe for business, academic, or professional reasons. The Tokyo community has a higher profile than Kobe, and the presence of the Israeli Embassy in the capital also may give members some additional opportunities for cultural and social activities. The Jewish Community of Japan, Tokyo's central representative body, is affiliated with the World Jewish Congress. In addition to the synagogue, the community center houses a Hebrew school, library, and recreational facilities. Friday night and Saturday services are followed by a kosher communal meal. The community premises, when launched, also included a Jewish Club, with a billiards room and other amenities.

Each community is organized along familiar constitutional lines. For instance, the Kobe community is organized as the Jewish Community of Kansai, with a General Committee consisting of a President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, and House Committee Chairman. The Constitution requires at least one General Meeting every six months as well as a monthly meeting of its Committee. As in other small communities, the importance of these constitutional principles and procedures to members has faded except at moments of communal controversy.

Communal membership is open to "all persons of the Jewish Faith 18 years of age and over, who are recognized permanent or semi-permanent residents." Although there are procedures to recommend that members "resign" from the community, the Kobe Constitution also stipulates that "under no condition shall a member of the Jewish Faith be denied the right to worship at the Synagogue." The Jews of Kobe are represented by the Jewish Community of Kansai, which is also affiliated with the World Jewish Congress. There was substantial damage to the Kobe synagogue during the 1995 earthquake, but the structure was completely repaired. One of the two tablets of the Ten Commandments over the Ark was damaged but has since been replaced.

The services in Kobe and Tokyo are a mixture of traditional and modern. The Kobe synagogue, Ohel Shelomoh, was built in 1970, not far from the

Kobe Club, set up for foreign residents in the city's attractive Kitano section. An earlier synagogue was destroyed in air raids during World War II. The community conducts its services largely according to Sephardic practice, reflecting the origins of its founders, although most of the Jews attending services are usually Ashkenazim. There is no full-time resident rabbi and the size of the community probably makes it unlikely that one will be recruited. Some services are conducted by visiting rabbis. In 1999, for example, a Chabad rabbi visited the Kobe community during Passover before returning with his family to his position in Hong Kong. Over the High Holy Day period the community was assisted in 1999 by a very popular Israeli, who led services which attracted many other Israelis from their work in Osaka and elsewhere.

The community is very warm and welcoming. After Friday night services all those who wish to do so can stay for dinner, with a kosher meal prepared by a Japanese cook. Meals are also provided after morning services and there is a "third meal" just before the evening service. Usually most of those attending services will remain throughout the day, only leaving after *havdalah*.

The Tokyo community has a full-time American rabbi. In 1999 Rabbi Carnie Rose, a Canadian, left for a position in Long Island; he was replaced by Rabbi Elliot Marmon, an American who had previously held a position in North Carolina. The Tokyo congregation has had some communal strife over its services. At present, the rabbi presides over an "egalitarian" service in the main sanctuary while an Orthodox service may be held (numbers permitting) elsewhere in the Center. Seating in the sanctuary is also somewhat innovative, with shared seating (men and women sitting together) in the middle. Sections reserved exclusively for men or for women are found on either side. Although inevitably there are some tensions as a result of the synagogue offering two distinctively different services simultaneously — they never finish at the same time — this is perhaps an improvement over the Kobe situation, where those unhappy with the Orthodox arrangements (women sit in a separate area behind a partition) simply do not attend or take part in Jewish activities.

It is always hazardous to attempt to estimate the numbers of Jews in a particular community. Japan's Jewish population (excluding American

armed forces personnel and diplomatic staff) is probably about 600, mostly in Tokyo, although the number who are active in synagogue or community affairs is considerably less. In such small communities a Bar or Bat Mitzvah — or a Jewish wedding — is a rare event indeed.

### Japan: A Haven for Refugees

Japan has always been one of the most homogeneous of countries. There is no commitment to a "plural" society and the only statues of liberty are replicas which for some reason crop up in all sorts of places around the country. Japanese attitudes towards foreigners have in fact oscillated wildly throughout Japan's history, from outright hostility to the most extravagant admiration. Visitors today will often find Japanese people to be as genuinely kind and compassionate as any, and there have been occasions in the past when these qualities have served to save Jewish lives. For instance, during 1917-20, in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Jews of Yokohama and Kobe were able to offer significant help to several thousand Jewish refugees with the cooperation of the Japanese government. Many of these refugees had been unable to land in Japan because they lacked the necessary funds. This problem was resolved through the help of Jacob Schiff, the leader of the New York banking firm of Kuhn, Loeb, and Company, and the then president of the American Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). Since Schiff had given Japan important financial assistance during the Russo-Japanese War, his request to make Yokohama and Kobe transit centers for the refugees was quickly accepted.

### Japan and the Holocaust

More recently, and more remarkably, Japan became one of the world's only countries where Jews could find refuge from the Holocaust. This occurred despite Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany. Following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Jewish refugees were unable to board Italian or Japanese ships en route from Italy to Shanghai or Japan. With passage from the Mediterranean effectively blocked, the only escape route east was through the Soviet Union on the Trans-Siberian Railway bound for Vladivostok. This route remained open until the German invasion of Russia in June 1941. More than 10,000 Jews, fleeing for their lives, were able to enter neutral Lithu-

ania from Poland between October 1939 and May 1940. Among them were nearly 5,000 who successfully made their way to Japan.

These refugees were granted passage through the help of the Dutch Consul in Kaunas, Lithuania. The Consul offered the refugees misleading landing permits and transit visas to Curacao in the Dutch West Indies. They were also assisted by Chiune Sugihara, the first representative of the Japanese consulate in Lithuania, who had arrived to take up his position in August 1939. Although the Japanese have generally not had a reputation for individuality — to say nothing of conspicuous disobedience to direct orders — Sugihara ignored instructions from his own government, going on to issue several thousand passports with a Japanese 8-12 day transit visa. Hillel Levine's 1996 book, *In Search of Sugihara*, suggests this remarkable figure, motivated, it seems, solely by kindness and humanity, may have saved as many as 10,000 lives. In any case, the documents he granted were sufficient to allow those Jews fortunate enough to have them to secure exit visas from the Russian authorities.

Sugihara's heroism, recognized years later by the State of Israel (and Yad Vashem), cost him dearly with his own government. He sacrificed his career while enabling thousands of Jews to survive. In Japan itself, notwithstanding the government's equivocal attitude, compassion for Jewish refugees soon overcame any political reservations. The Japanese government assisted Jews and Jewish organizations, such as the National Council of Jews in Asia, providing food, shelter, and transportation. Individual Japanese offered Jewish people free medical service, gifts and food, treating them with decency and generosity.

About 500 of the Jewish refugees were students, rabbis, and families from the Yeshiva of Mir, the only European institute of Talmudic learning to remain intact throughout the Holocaust. While efforts were made to move the Yeshiva to the West, it established its study hall (Beit Midrash) in a Kobe neighborhood. Since the Japanese had never seen a yeshiva before, especially one whose daily 18 hours of study consisted of fervent singing and praying, an official was sent to examine the school. The yeshiva not only received "clearance" from the government, its members were regarded as "Holy idealists."

The refugees lived peacefully in Japan for some three to eight months, beginning in the winter of 1940-41. Before the bombing of Pearl Harbor half of them were able to move to the United States, Canada, and other areas in the Western Hemisphere. With no other place to turn, the remainder, including the entire Yeshiva of Mir, relocated to Japanese-occupied Shanghai. Here, too, the Japanese record proved exemplary, as the government resisted determined and repeated requests from Nazi German officials for assistance in the relocation and extermination of the Jews in the Shanghai ghetto.

Explicit anti-Jewish activity in Japan has been minimal. There are some accounts of Jews losing jobs during World War II. Music schools where Jewish performers taught were closed. On the whole, however, German advice and encouragement for the Japanese to establish anti-Jewish policies met with resistance from Japanese officials. Some of this reluctance may have been influenced by hopes of access to Jewish capital. Nevertheless, on December 31, 1940, Japanese Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke told a group of Jewish businessmen, "I am the man responsible for the alliance with Hitler, but nowhere have I promised that we would carry out his anti-Semitic policies in Japan. This is not simply my personal opinion, it is the opinion of Japan, and I have no compunction about announcing it to the world."

There have also been many cases where Japanese, seeing themselves as victims of wartime raids and nuclear attack, have sympathized strongly with Jewish suffering. Some Japanese see parallels between their own personal and family wartime tragedies and those experienced by the Jews of Europe. Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* has been required reading for Japanese students for many years, and copies of the book can be seen in many Japanese homes. The book first appeared in Japan in 1952 and has since sold millions of copies. There have been numerous student essay contests about the work and there is even a company named after her, Anne Co., Ltd.

Films about the Holocaust are frequently shown in Japan, both on television and in the movies. The most recent to gain wide exposure is the award-winning Italian movie "Life is Beautiful." Other incidents and events (such as the trials of Nazi war criminals) have also brought the Holocaust to Jap-

anese public awareness. There is a Holocaust Museum in Hiroshima and a Holocaust Resource Center in Tokyo, as well as some Japanese poetry comparing Hiroshima with Auschwitz.

### **Jews in Japanese Thinking**

The Japanese attitude towards Jews, Judaism, and Israel seems somewhat complex. Only rarely is it accompanied by much first-hand information or detailed knowledge. Most Japanese people lack any awareness of Jews, which in some cases seems in many ways quite remarkable. For instance, few Japanese residents of Tokyo or Kobe would have any idea that there were Jewish communities or synagogues located in their cities. A visitor asking for directions to the synagogue might as well be inquiring after the most direct route to the pyramids. The nature of Jewish life, too, lies outside of Japanese experience. As for what takes place inside a synagogue, this is almost a complete mystery. Yet Japanese people are singularly thoughtful and sensitive. One hint of dietary requirements is all that is necessary for Japanese to go to great lengths, over a long and sustained period, to ensure that a visitor's needs will be fully met.

Such anti-Jewish attitudes as may exist stem more from a heritage of anti-foreign perspectives, one which goes back a long way in Japanese history and culture. As an isolated island nation which had minimal contact with foreign nations for much of its history, this has at times left Japanese people ill-equipped to deal with provocative points of view. Some anti-Jewish attitudes have at times found their way into widely read publications, yet in the long run they seem to have had little impact on individual Japanese perceptions about Jews and Judaism. Postwar Japan has developed a pacifist political culture which makes it a largely uninviting environment for organized hostility towards other peoples.

Publications identifying the Jews as the reason for Japan's problems have had their run, but seem in the end to have had only a shallow influence on policies or events. Nevertheless, ignorance does leave scope for considerable embarrassment. In October 1999, a Japanese publication, *The Weekly Post*, which has 852,000 subscribers and describes itself as the best-selling news magazine in the country, focusing on politics and the economy, published a story on the proposed acquisition of a

Japanese bank, and soon generated strong complaints by Jewish groups, particularly outside of Japan. *The Weekly Post* quickly retracted the article and carried an apology on its home page. The publication explained its error by noting that "the problem stemmed from the stereotyped image of the Jewish people that many Japanese people have."

On occasion, Japanese images of Jews — to the extent that they have any — display a certain ambivalence. If some Japanese view Jews as powerful or affluent, others admire Jewish intellect and prosperity. Some have argued that Japan should learn from what is imagined to be Jewish business tactics and strategies. More typically, Japanese rarely meet Jews or, more accurately, realize that they are doing so. In this sense, Jewish people are seldom if ever distinguished from other foreigners unless they take some action themselves (such as observing dietary laws, the Sabbath, or holidays).

As elsewhere, anti-Zionism has had an influence over Japanese policy-makers. Following the 1967 Six-Day War, left-wing Japanese began to sympathize with the Arabs who, defeated, were now perceived as the underdog. In addition, conservative circles in government, business, and the bureaucracy were concerned about the country's access to oil, a dependency to which resource-poor Japan has been acutely sensitive. Japanese businesses were largely willing to comply with the Arab boycott and it was not until the 1990s peace process gained momentum that Japanese companies began to take a more active role in the Israeli economy. In addition, there are some Japanese university staff who conduct research into the Hebrew language and Jewish affairs. In 1995, the Japanese-Jewish Friendship and Study Society was established, and the fourth volume of the group's journal, *Namal*, was published in 1999.

### **Japanese Fascination with Judaism and Israel**

As in other countries, some Japanese have been fascinated with kibbutz ideology, going to work for a time as volunteers at kibbutzim. It is likely that — apart from idealism and a sense of adventure — the collective approach of kibbutz life resonates well with Japanese values, which traditionally give primacy to the group over the individual. In 1963, Tezuka Nobuyoshi set up the Japan Kibbutz Association (Nihon Kibutsu Kyokai) which grew to

30,000 members within a few years. This group produced a number of publications and sent Japanese to volunteer on kibbutzim in Israel. One Japanese person who volunteered in Israel with the association wrote the 1965 best-seller, *Shalom Israel*, describing the warmth of kibbutz life.

Another group which sends Japanese to volunteer on kibbutzim is the Makuya, a pro-Israel Christian group which claims to have 60,000 members. The group was founded by Teshima Ikuro, who believed that the Japanese originate from one of the ten lost tribes of Israel. Some of the Makuya's pro-Israel activity included a rally in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York in 1971. After Japanese terrorists opened fire in the Tel Aviv airport in 1972, Teshima went to Israel to apologize to the families and offer bereavement. As well, 3,000 members led the first demonstration in Japan, held in Tokyo after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, to promote peace in Israel.

Another pro-Israel group is the Japanese Christian Friends of Israel, with perhaps 10,000 members. Its headquarters, Beit Shalom (House of Peace), is located in Kyoto. The group is also well known for its choir, the Shinome (Dawn) Chorus, which sings Israeli and Japanese songs and has traveled to Israel, Europe, and the United States. The group's main ideology centers on support for Israel and includes prayers for the coming of the Messiah. Rather than encourage conversion to Christianity, the group emphasizes peace between peoples. The Mayor of Jerusalem, Ehud Olmert, visited Beit Shalom in 1999. Jews and Israelis are specifically welcome to stay at Beit Shalom for up to three nights free of charge.

Kampo Harada, one of Japan's most famous calligraphers, also believed that the Japanese were descended from the lost tribes. Kampo went all over the world to do calligraphy, even traveling to Israel to paint for Yitzhak Rabin. Kampo was an earnest collector of Judaica. Hidden in the back of his Kyoto museum is a small room filled with Jewish books, three Torah scrolls, and various Jewish objects for use with prayer. Kampo's impressive collection includes hundreds of books about Israel, Jewish thought, prayer books, and books in Hebrew. There are rare works such as the Babylonian Talmud, the complete Zohar, and a Torah scroll which was saved at the end of World War II by an American soldier in Germany. Kampo collected

Jewish books for forty years, and has another 4,600 books being held at a museum in Shiga-ken.

### **The Future of Jewish Life in Japan**

When the Tokyo synagogue, Beth David, with its beautiful sanctuary, was dedicated in November 1968, the motives for maintaining Jewish life in Japan were articulated in a dedication speech at that time: "Here, in a strange land on the edge of the diaspora, far from the world centers of Judaism, with no external, visible reminders of our heritage, a whole generation, our children, are in constant danger of being lost to our people. This is why we have a Jewish Community, why we determinedly, stubbornly, even fiercely insist on a center of Jewish life in Tokyo, where we can raise our children as Jews."

Japan's Jewish population seems destined never to be very large, however, and there remains, in Japan as elsewhere, the reality of intermarriage. The attractions of Japanese to Western visitors having long been celebrated in literature and the arts. Jews living in Japan have not been exempt from these sentiments. In most cases the children of Japanese-Jewish marriages are not raised as Jews. However, a visit to the Kobe and Tokyo synagogues also finds a handful of Japanese Jews present at services. Some of them have Jewish spouses; others have converted to Judaism for various reasons. Converts to Judaism in Japan are not numerous, but they can and do have an impact on a community's life. In Kobe, for instance, a Japanese woman became an important member of the small community after her interest in Judaism (sparked by friendships with Kobe Jews) led to a program of study in the United States and participation in a formal conversion program. Her interest in Judaism reflected dissatisfaction with the secular attitudes of the younger generation of Japanese. Her subsequent marriage to an Israeli (formerly resident in Kobe), in Israel, was attended by other members of the Kobe congregation.

Of course Japan has a way of inspiring visitors with its own distinctive atmosphere. Some of its attractiveness is spiritual; even the seasons can seem intoxicating in Japan, with each providing its own special beauty, its own particular charm. The Japanese and the Jews — the subject of more than one book — do share much in common, as complex peoples who are among the world's most enduring

and most modern, at once traditional and innovative, respectful of the past yet zealous for the future. If any bridge is needed between them, it is surely in the example of a Japanese diplomat — long neglected both by Japanese and by Jews — a man who, nearly 60 years ago, held life in his fin-

gertips, in the form of pieces of paper, and gave them to all that he could reach — Sugihara, a righteous Japanese who helps make it possible for Jews to visit and live in Japan in warmth and with pride.

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