

THE JAPANESE WAY

THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN IS AN ENIGMA TO THE FOREIGN TRAVELLER



SUSHI, TOYOTA, MAZDA, SHOGUN, samurai, ninja, bullet train, ikebana, origami, sumo wrestler and karate, a spectrum of the many Japanese foods, technologies and cultural art terms that most Westerners are so familiar with.

Yet Japan, an island that remained off limits to the West until its doors were forced open by Commodore Perry in the 1860s, remains, in many respects, an enigma and fascination to the foreign traveller of which relatively few visit compared to other countries.

"The Japanese are made, not born," is the provocative, but considered, sub-title to a chapter in a book on Japanese society, by Boye Lafayette De Mente, an authority on Japanese culture, in his book *Japan Unmasked*. My wife, Michelle, and I, were overawed by the fanatically sanitised and

robotic efficiency of the homogenous Japanese we encountered in various walks of life, from Kyoto to Tokyo, during our trip to Japan with World Mizrachi, in March 2010. The incredible uniformity of physical appearance, courtesy and lifestyle is the outcome of cultural conditioning going back many centuries in Japan, known as "kata" or the "Japanese way", which is a highly developed social process involving thought, manner and action designed to maximise

fish pond, surrounded by perfectly manicured and carefully placed rocks and trees, is testimony to Japanese gardening as an art form, and man's ability to master his natural environment.

The predominant religions in Japan have, for many centuries, been Buddhism and Confucianism. De Mente points out that in stark contrast to the Judeo-Christian basis of morality, traditional Japanese morality was what the ruling authority said

to have entered Japan with Dutch and Portuguese merchants in the early 16th Century, Jews did not permanently settle there until after Commodore Perry's arrival in 1853. The first Jewish settler came to Yokohama, near Tokyo, in 1861, and by 1859, with about 50 families, the community was able to dedicate its first synagogue in 1895. Jews arrived in Nagasaki in the 1880s, a significant Japanese port, and the Beth Israel Synagogue was built in 1894.



effectiveness in any endeavour, which demands strict conformity and personal self-sacrifice from each individual in society in order to be "in harmony" with the group.

This kata expression in earlier times was used in wet-rice farming, "Kanji", the intricate Japanese handwriting, which closely resembles Chinese, the tea ceremony and the making of arts and crafts. In Tokyo, we witnessed firsthand the tea "kata" ritual in a busy department store dealing with its customers. Each customer was greeted with the customary bow, payment was made by placing the money or credit card in a specially designed container, which was handed by the shop assistant to the cashier, who then returned the change or credit card with a further bow and a polite "thank you". While this was going on, each purchase was being magnificently wrapped by another assistant to create a work of art in itself! The process was quick and efficient. It is no wonder that a population so focused and disciplined has grown in a few decades into the world's second largest economy.

The gardens in Kyoto were breathtaking. The golden Shinto shrine set in a large Koi

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it was, and not made in Heaven by an infallible G-d. Japanese morality has accordingly been built on laws and customs that have served the governing authorities, a factor which explains the ability to swing from extreme politeness to extreme rudeness, and extreme kindness to extreme brutality, as evidenced in the Sino-Japanese wars in the early twentieth century. We observed Japanese approaching Shinto temples, giving a single clap facing the temple to "attract the attention of the gods", while bowing and making personal requests, and were told that there are no prescribed prayers or formal religious obligations placed on any adherent.

Although Jewish travellers were known

The community disintegrated, however, and in 1905, during the Russo-Japanese War, its Torah scroll was passed on to the Jews of Kobe, many of whom were Jewish soldiers that had been liberated after the Russian Revolution in 1905.

No doubt, for Jews, the most remarkable and greatest of all Japanese people, was the Japanese Consul in Kovno, Lithuania, who took up his position in August 1939. After sending several requests to his government in July 1941, Chiune (Sempo) Sugihara, together with his wife, wrote by hand during the period 31 July 1941 to 28 August 1941 hundreds of transit visas day and night, and even while on the train waiting to leave for Japan, after he had been recalled by his >

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government, which saved the lives of about 6 000 Jews, including the entire Mirer Yeshiva. There are about 40 000 Jews alive in the world today, descended from those who were able to obtain the life-saving visas of a man who followed his conscience, and did what he later described as nothing heroic, but simply “doing the right thing”.

In Kyoto we were inspired by the followers of Father Takeji Otsuki, which presently has about 10 000 members throughout the country, who founded the community after he had a vision on 9 January 1938 in Manchuria, China. He claimed that G-d had given him four commandments:

- To pray for the independence of the Jewish State.
- To pray for the redemption of the people of Israel.
- To pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

“ TOKYO, THE CENTRE OF MODERN JAPAN IS A HUGE METROPOLIS, THE MOST POPULOUS CITY ON EARTH, WITH A POPULATION OF BETWEEN 15 MILLION TO 25 MILLION PEOPLE. ”

- To pray for the coming of the Messiah, the descendant of King David, who will establish eternal peace in the world.

Our group was overcome with emotion when we visited the “Beth Shalom” community centre, and were warmly greeted by Father Otsuki’s followers and treated to a choir singing classical Hebrew songs, including “Yerushalayim Shel Zahav”, and a speech in perfect Hebrew by one of the leaders of this unique church. The ceremony ended with the Japanese audience and our group singing Hatikva, Israel’s national anthem, with great pride and passion! The community sends volunteers to Israel in times of crisis, and while being clearly great lovers of Israel and the Jewish people, do not aspire to being Jewish.

We travelled from Kyoto to Tokyo on the Shinkansen bullet train, a journey of about 530km done in about two hours and 40 minutes, with three stops. We passed famous Mt Fuji for less than a minute, viewed from our wide comfortable seats, on a seamless railway line custom built for the dolphin-nosed sleek white train as it snaked

through vast landscapes of paddy fields and villages along the route.

Tokyo, the centre of modern Japan is a huge metropolis, the most populous city on earth, with a population of between 15 million to 25 million people, depending on how many surrounding suburbs one includes in the calculation. The city is ultra-modern with skyscrapers in abundance. With most men in two-piece black suits, each holding a brief case, specially designed smoking areas on certain street corners, no litter in the streets, an absence of beggars, and everyone obeying traffic lights; it was a far cry from the streets of Johannesburg we are used to! We spent Shabbat at Chabad House Tokyo, with Rabbi Mendel Suda-kevich, his wife Chana, and family. One of the longstanding congregants in their community is a world authority on goldfish,

a former New Yorker, Noah Tietler, who has made Japan his home as it is perfectly suited for his studies.

We were treated to a bus ride into the Japanese Alps and explored the alpine villages of Takayama and Hakone, enjoyed a boat ride on Lake Ashi, and a cable way to the peak of a mountain, which on the day was covered in thick fog and buffeted by strong winds.

We visited a memorial to Chiune Sugihara, near the town in which he was born, Yoatsu, to a Samurai family on 1 January 1900. While it is commendable that the Japanese now acknowledge a modern day hero, who was considered by his government a persona non grata and expelled him from the Foreign Service on his return from Lithuania, I felt that the memorial did not go far enough in spelling out his heroism in sufficient detail. I appreciate, however, the dilemma of a society which is so utterly conformist, giving recognition to an individual that acted contrary to his society on the basis of his individual conscience.

It is said that there are about 1 000 Jews

presently in Japan, about 0.0008% of Japan’s population. While it is certainly not a country in which Jews have played a significant role, as they have in virtually every country they have inhabited, there have been two major figures in Japanese society that stand out for the Jewish people. The one, Chiune Sugihara, mentioned earlier. The second was Jacobs Schiff, a Jewish Wall Street financier who, in 1903, arranged a loan of \$196 million to the Japanese in their war against the Russians, a huge sum of money today, and how much more so over a century ago! In the minds of a number of influential Japanese politicians, this gave the impression of the possible enormity of Jewish financial clout in the mid-1930s and gave rise to a secret plan to attract Jews, referred to as the “Fugu Plan”.

The leadership of the American Jewish Congress were given the opportunity to send as many as one million East European Jews to Manchuria, in China, under Japanese control, in an attempt by the Japanese to harness Jewish intellect and industriousness. This was also part of the Japanese plan to harness Jewish intellect and industriousness. And it was part of the Japanese strategy to populate the territory occupied by them in China. The plan was, however, rejected in 1939, by among others, Rabbi Stephen Weiss, a spokesman for Reform Judaism and Zionism in the USA, and close to Roosevelt, and who was then president of the World Jewish Congress. The thinking at the time was that the Japanese were allies of the Nazis and bound to be anti-Semitic. When the Japanese were asked during the Holocaust to reconsider, the window of opportunity offered earlier was no more.

So Japan too, the Land of the Rising Sun, a distant but powerful country in the extreme East of the globe, in its curious way, played a role in the odyssey of Jewish survival; and had the Fugu Plan come to fruition, the mind boggles as to how this may have impacted on the face of world Jewry today. **IL**



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