

► China's largest and oldest Jewish community is thriving

Judaism with Shanghai characteristics

As in most major cities around the world, Jewish people in Shanghai keep their community intimate, organized and commercially profitable. Dating back to the 19th century, Baghdadi Jews in particular have played a significant role in Shanghai's culture and economy, running prosperous enterprises from the opium trade to real estate.

Jews are also responsible for some of Shanghai's most iconic heritage architecture, including the Peace Hotel, the Cathay Theatre and the Broadway Mansions. The Sassoon family, who made Shanghai's Bund – originally a Persian word used along the Tigris in their hometown Baghdad – what it is today, along with the Haroon family, real estate barons who held most of the buildings along Nanjing Road East, are just a couple of the many notable Jewish families in Shanghai history.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian Jews fleeing the Bolsheviks arrived in China as refugees, soon followed by European Jews escaping Nazi Germany. At the time, Shanghai was the only Chinese city willing to accept stateless foreign refugees. In the years leading up to WWII, the number of Jews in Shanghai reached 30,000. Their community, near north Bund in Hongkou district, would eventually be known as the "Shanghai Ghetto."

Feeling at home

Passover, an important eight-day biblical holiday that commences annually on the 15th of the Hebrew month of Nisan (April), is a time for Jewish people to commemorate their liberation from slavery in Egypt and their freedom as a nation under the leadership of Moses. For Jews in Shanghai, the first dinner of Passover, called Seder, is customarily celebrated at the Chabad Jewish Center of Pudong.

Rabbi Avraham Greenberg, the di-

rector of Chabad of Pudong, lead this year's Seder for nearly 200 attendees. Special pamphlets called Haggadah were made available to Jews and non-Jews in attendance to explain the order of the rituals and events that day. After everyone washed their hands with water, the dinner kicked off with wine and Matzah, an unleavened flatbread that has become the symbol of Passover (pictured right).

Justin Meshulam from New York, who has been working as a teacher in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, for one year came all the way in to Shanghai just to celebrate the Seder. "This is only my second Seder in China. At first I was overwhelmed by the amount of people, as my usual Seder back home is always under 20 people. But once I saw the traditional foods, I felt at home. It's wonderful to meet so many Jewish people so far away," Meshulam told the Global Times.

"They did a stellar job keeping the kids entertained with various activities, prayers and customs in both English and Hebrew so everyone could participate. Seder food is always a challenge as it must be kosher with very strict guidelines to adhere to, yet they still pulled it off!" said Reouven Perez, Moroccan Jew raised in Montreal, Canada, a CEO who has lived and worked in China for 20 years. He considers himself a "very traditional" Jew and thus regularly attends Chabad events with his Italian wife and their three children.

Ethnic diversity

The Chabad Jewish Center of Pudong first opened in 2005. It is run by Rabbi Avraham Greenberg and his wife Nechamie, who were originally invited to China by his brother Rabbi Shalom Greenberg, who in 1999 opened the Shanghai Jewish Center in Hongqiao. Over 800 Jews from



Israel, the US, Europe, South America and South Africa are regular participants at three Jewish centers in Shanghai.

Chabad organizes annual holiday events for Hanukkah, Passover, Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur. It also hosts a weekly Hebrew School for young Jews to learn the Hebrew language, traditions and history. The center runs several adult study groups as well, such as a Women's Circle, a Power Breakfast and a Lunch and Learn.

Rabbi Avraham was born in Israel but eventually moved to the US to pursue his rabbinical studies. He believes that Shanghai's rich ethnic diversity helps make their Jewish community more unique relative to other Jewish communities in the world.

"We have people from different countries and different levels of religious observance. When they were living in their hometowns, people from different backgrounds there probably wouldn't have a chance to meet. But when they're in Shanghai, they appreciate and enjoy people from other countries and backgrounds," Rabbi Avraham told the Global Times.

Involved in community

In terms of involvement in the community, Rabbi Avraham said that the fact of being in a non-religious country like China compels Jews to take their spirituality more seriously.

"Jewish people in Shanghai tend to get involved in Jewish community life and religious activities much more than when they lived in their respective home countries. This is largely because when a Jew first comes to China, where there's not much Jewish life, they become keenly aware that his or her Judaism will not come automatically. They need to take it into their own hands, take the initiative. Therefore they become much more involved," Rabbi Avraham said.

The rabbi added that in Western cities such as New York where there are many Jewish peoples, some Jews may "fall between the cracks." "But here in Shanghai, everyone gets the feeling they belong to one big family," he said. "Everyone here plays an active role in our services."

"They have a brilliant way of balancing tolerance by accepting anyone in the community without ever compromising or bending the rules and traditions of Judaism," said Perez. "They build real communities and without any financial assistance from Chabad International – not an easy task."

"It is difficult being Jewish in China because there are not many organized services, and in Nanjing I have only met one other Jewish person," Meshulam told the Global Times. "But one thing that surprised me here is the locals' curiosity about Judaism. Many Chinese people I meet can tell that I am Jewish from my last name and like to ask me questions about my religious background."

The article was written by Furkan Erdogan



Rabbi Avraham Greenberg, his wife Nechamie and children at this year's Seder dinner Photos: Courtesy of Chabad Jewish Center of Pudong