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 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 Hardoon 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 10,000. Their community, near North Bund in Hongkou district, would eventually be recognized services, and in Nanjing I have only met one other Jewish person,” Meshulam told the Global Times. “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 me their 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.

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, there’s no 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.”

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