

JPRI Occasional Paper No. 6 (November 1995)

The Jews and the Japanese: Cultural Traits and Common Values

by Ben-Ami Shillony

Professor Ben-Ami Shillony teaches Japanese history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and is the author of The Jews and the Japanese (Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1992). On July 16, 1995, he was the keynote speaker at the first Jewish and Japanese American Conference held in Los Angeles at the Stephen S. Wise Temple. Also speaking at the conference was Hiroki Sugihara, the son of Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese diplomat to Lithuania during World War II, who saved thousands of Jews by giving them transit visas to Japan. Dr. Shillony's remarks follow.

Ladies and gentlemen, and distinguished guests. Thank you for inviting me all the way from Jerusalem, the City of God, to Los Angeles, the City of Angels, to open this first Jewish and Japanese American conference. For many years, while working on various aspects of Japanese history, I have been interested in the relations between the Jews and the Japanese, and in the cultural comparison between these two peoples. I am therefore delighted to witness today this link being forged, in this city where more people of Jewish and Japanese descent live together than in any other place in the world.

It has often been said that American society is a melting pot, where different elements are transformed into a new substance. In rebuttal to that, it has been argued that rather than a melting pot, American society is a salad bowl, in which each element preserves its original nature. My own gastronomic suggestion is that it is a sukiyaki pan, where different ingredients simmer together in the same sauce, assuming a common flavor, but retaining much of their original shape, color, and taste. The pan and the sauce are important, but it is the ingredients that make the dish so tasty. Today I would like to speak about two of these ingredients, the tofu and the matzoh-ball, to stretch somewhat the sukiyaki example, which seem to me the most delicious.

The Jews and the Japanese arrived in the United States from opposite geographical directions. The Jews came from the East, that is Europe, and settled first on the Atlantic coast; whereas the Japanese arrived from the West, that is Asia, and settled on the Pacific coast. They also came from opposite religious backgrounds. The Jews came from a monotheistic creed, in which an almighty God expected them to obey his commandments and observe his rules. Religion was, therefore, for them the cardinal element in their collective self-identity. The Japanese arrived from a polytheistic, nature-oriented way of life, which emphasized spirituality but tolerated different faiths and made few demands.

Shinto and Buddhism could be adapted to new circumstances, modified, or altogether discarded, without affecting the collective self-identity of the Japanese.

Let me give you two examples. Most Jews today live according to the Western, Gregorian calendar, but when celebrating their religious holidays all of them follow the traditional Jewish calendar. In Japan, when the government decided to adopt the Western calendar in 1873, all holidays moved back by about a month-and-a-half, without any significant public protest being registered. It was as if the government of Israel were to decide that Rosh Hashana should be observed on September 1st and Yom Kippur on September 10th, and everyone accepted it. At that time, the Meiji government in Japan also decided that in order to improve the health of the people, the Japanese should start eating meat and drinking milk, something that for more than a millennium they had abstained from doing. To convince the people to change their diet, the government asked Emperor Meiji to eat meat and drink milk in public, which he obediently did. Just imagine the government of Israel, or of any other country, asking the chief rabbi to eat pork in public, because this might improve the health of the people, and the rabbi doing it.

When the Jews and the Japanese adopted modern Western culture in the nineteenth century, they did it without adopting Christianity. But they rejected the Western religion for different reasons. The Jews rejected it because religion was very important to them; therefore, becoming a Christian meant abandoning the Jewish people and betraying their families and friends. The Japanese rejected Christianity because religion was less important to them, and they saw no reason why they should adopt an exclusive foreign faith that would prevent them from worshipping their gods and ancestors. So, the Jews who arrived in America stuck to Judaism, and only a very few converted to Christianity. On the other hand, many Japanese immigrants saw it as logical and proper to adopt the religion of their host country, in the same way that they would worship a local deity in Japan. After all, Jesus was the local deity of the U.S. Some Japanese remained Buddhist, preferring the tolerant spirituality that they had been accustomed to. Very few remained Shintoists, a religion that is rooted in the landscapes and seasons of Japan, although some of the new Shinto sects, like Tenrikyo, have gained believers.

There was another difference between the Jews and the Japanese. The Jews had a long tradition of living in foreign countries and of moving from one place to another. Since the destruction of their Second Temple, almost two thousand years ago, they have been wandering in the world, maintaining their ethnic and religious identity without a state or a permanent territorial base of their own, surviving as a minority in often hostile societies. Unlike the Japanese, the Jews did not arrive in the United States from their own country, but from other countries, which they had regarded as exile, and where conditions were worse. Immigrating to the United States did not disrupt Jewish culture. On the contrary, after a period of adjustment, it flourished as never before in modern times.

The Japanese historical experience was different. From the time they became a nation around the third century, until the end of World War II, the Japanese had continuously lived in an independent and sovereign state, and they felt no need to leave it. The self-imposed national seclusion of the Edo period, from the early seventeenth to the mid-

nineteenth century, strengthened this identification of the people with their land. When Japanese laborers started emigrating to Hawaii and California in the late nineteenth century, most of them were historically and culturally 'ready' to shed their ties with the homeland. The first generation, the *Issei*, spoke Japanese and observed Japanese customs; but their children, the *Nissei*, hardly spoke Japanese and tried to become full Americans.

It is significant that the Jewish immigrants called themselves American Jews, whereas the Japanese insisted on calling themselves Japanese Americans. The Jews maintained connections with other Jewish communities in the world, and when the State of Israel was established, many of them became its staunch supporters. The Japanese Americans showed less interest in other Japanese communities, and when their former country attacked their adopted one, they gave their full support to the United States, and they continue to support it in its present trade dispute with Japan. It is inconceivable for Japanese Americans to establish a pro-Japan lobby in Washington on the model of the Israel lobby there. Yet Japanese Americans are no longer ashamed of their country of origin. Hideo Nomo, pitching for the Los Angeles Dodgers, may be providing them today with the same sense of pride that Israel used to provide for American Jews.

Despite the differences of history and culture, there are interesting similarities between the Japanese Americans and the American Jews, a fact which makes this conference all the more exciting. One similarity is that both communities have been victims of racism and discrimination for a long time. In the first half of this century, religious and racial antisemitism was rampant in various parts of the United States, and Jews were discriminated against in universities, public offices, housing, and jobs. Although antisemitism is less explicit today than it was in the past, it is not dead, and antisemitic outbursts occur from time to time.

The fate of the Japanese Americans was even worse. At the beginning of the century, Japanese immigrants in California were harassed, they could not be naturalized or own land, and their children were excluded from public schools. Then the Immigration Law of 1924 banned all Oriental immigration into the United States. The discriminatory nature of this law was manifested in the fact that with regard to Occidentals immigration policy was based on the country of origin, whereas with regard to Orientals it was based on race. Therefore, a Japanese citizen of Canada, say, could not immigrate to the United States because of the color of his skin. Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the entire Japanese population of the West Coast, numbering about 112,000 persons, most of them American citizens born in the United States, was incarcerated for more than three years in relocation camps in desolate parts of the country. This was done to them despite the fact that none of them had engaged in any illegal activity, and no similar measures were taken against Americans of German origin. Nevertheless, the Japanese Americans manifested their loyalty to the U.S. during World War II by volunteering for the armed forces. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team, composed solely of *Nissei*, which saw action in Europe, became the most highly decorated American unit in World War II. Japanese American soldiers of the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion liberated the Dachau concentration camp in Germany, where many Jews had been imprisoned.

Despite all the discrimination they encountered, the Jews and the Japanese demonstrated great optimism and dynamism. Putting their faith in American democracy and freedom, they harnessed their energies, organized themselves to help each other, and became model ethnic minorities with the highest levels of education and the lowest rates of criminal behavior. They were able to achieve all that because they had brought with them similar core values that had long been embedded in their respective cultures.

Perhaps the most important of these core values was the high regard for education. Throughout their history, the Jews have venerated learning. To an orthodox Jew, the most meritorious activity is neither prayer nor performing rituals, but the intensive study of scriptures, like the Torah, the Talmud, and their many commentaries. Pious Jews spend most of their time in religious schools, called *yeshiva*, in front of books, reading, chanting, reciting, analyzing, discussing, disputing, and memorizing their texts. The Jewish rabbi is not a priest, but a teacher, selected for that post because he has excelled in learning. When in the nineteenth century the Jews entered the secular, modern society of Europe, they directed their thirst for knowledge and enthusiasm for learning toward all the fields of modern science, and within one generation became leading scholars in them.

The Japanese, too, had been a people of the book, although in a more secular sense. For many centuries they have been writing, compiling, reading, and studying books in both Chinese and Japanese. Despite their difficult writing system, they have had, since the seventeenth century, the highest rate of literacy in Asia, and one of the highest rates in the world. Despite its rigid class system, premodern Japan possessed a wide and sophisticated network of schools, in which children of aristocrats, samurai, and commoners received their education. By the beginning of this century, almost all Japanese children attended elementary school. The learned person, or *sensei*, has always been highly esteemed in Japan. When the Japanese decided to adopt Western techniques in the nineteenth century, they displayed the same enthusiasm for learning as did the Jews. This was not a new phenomenon in Japan, for they learned Western culture as thoroughly as they had learned Chinese culture in the past. Like the Jews, the Japanese quickly mastered the fields of science and excelled in them. In 1889, a Japanese biologist, Kitazato Shibasaburo, discovered the bacteria that cause tetanus; in 1901, a Japanese chemist Takamine Jokichi, was the first to isolate adrenalin; and in 1910, another Japanese chemist, Suzuki Umetaro, was the first to extract Vitamin B.

The Jewish and Japanese immigrants to the U.S. were poor, but almost all of them were literate, and their great ambition was that their children should attend college. They achieved that goal by working hard and saving. This shows two other core values common to these communities: esteem of family and diligence. The family was always a central institution among the Jews and the Japanese. In the Ten Commandments, “honor thy father and thy mother” appears before “thou shalt not kill” and “thou shalt not steal.” In Confucianism, the social philosophy of East Asia, filial piety was the highest moral precept. When they moved to the United States, the Jews and the Japanese continued to maintain strong family connections. It was the family that prodded the young to learn and advance, and it was the family that kept them from straying into crime and violence. Making a career and acquiring fame was the best way to repay the family for what it had

done for the individual. The Jewish mother and the Japanese mother also knew how to implant a sense of moral indebtedness in their children, so that they should work hard to requite it. In some ways, the Japanese showed a stronger family cohesion, for unlike many Jews, who changed their family names into English-sounding ones, the Japanese kept their surnames and none of them became a Mr. Smith or a Ms. Taylor.

It took the Japanese and the Jews a long time to discover each other. The first significant encounter occurred during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, when tens of thousands of Jewish soldiers, in Russian uniforms, fought against Japan. Although many of them distinguished themselves in battle, their sympathies were with Japan, which they regarded as a messenger of God, punishing Czarist Russia for its mistreatment of the Jews. An American Jewish banker, Jacob Schiff, helped Japan raise the loans that were needed to win the war. An American Jewish poet, Naphtali Herz Imber, the author of the Israeli anthem *Hatikva*, wrote poems, in Hebrew and English, praising the Japanese and their emperor.

When Albert Einstein visited Japan in 1922, he was enthusiastically received wherever he went. In the 1930s many Jewish musicians, fleeing from Nazi persecution, were welcomed in Japan, where they performed and taught music throughout the war. Yet most Japanese knew very little about the Jews, and when they became allies of Hitler, many espoused his antisemitic theories. Nevertheless, about 30,000 Jewish refugees found shelter in Japan and in Japanese-occupied territories, mainly Shanghai, during World War II. Japan lacked the religious and social roots of Western antisemitism and therefore could not understand why the Jews, who were considered to be super-rich, super-smart, and in control of the world, should be harassed instead of befriended. An outstanding example of good will toward the Jews was Sugihara Chiune, the Japanese consul in Kaunas, Lithuania. In 1940, he issued thousands of transit visas to Jewish refugees who were fleeing from the Nazi horrors, despite the objections of his superiors. His visas enabled the refugees, among them all 300 teachers and students of the Mir *yeshiva*, to pass through the Soviet Union and Japan, and to find shelter in Japanese-held Shanghai.

When the Allied occupation of Japan ended in 1952, Japan and Israel established diplomatic relations. Japan was the first country in Asia to establish relations with the Jewish state, and Israel was the first country in the Middle East to establish relations with Japan after World War II. So long as the two countries were poor and preoccupied with their own affairs, there was little substance to these relations. However, some young Japanese became enthusiastic about the Israeli kibbutz; and some Japanese Christian sects, like the *Makuya*, developed a strong attachment to Israel, which they regard as a harbinger of the Messiah.

When the Japanese economy started prospering, Japan fell victim to the Arab boycott. Heavily dependent on Middle East oil for its surging industries, Japan refrained from expanding its economic and diplomatic relations with Israel. But it never abrogated them. Thus for many years, Israelis could buy just one brand of Japanese car, the Subaru, and so many bought them that the nickname for an Israeli *nouveau riche* became a *subaroid*. This situation started changing in the mid-1980s, with the declining leverage of the OPEC

countries, and it came to an end with the Gulf War and the Middle East peace process. Today, Japan is the second largest trading partner of Israel, after the United States, and Israeli roads are jammed with Toyotas and Hondas as well as Subarus.

There is great interest in Israel in Japanese culture and in the Japanese economy. The Department of East Asian Studies at the Hebrew University, where I teach, is the largest department in the school of humanities, with about 250 students majoring in Japanese. Our university plans, if it can find the financial support, to set up a Japan Center that could serve the whole country as well as other countries in the Middle East. There is also a growing interest among Japanese in Israel and the Jews. This interest is sometimes perverted by the appearance of antisemitic books and articles based on ignorance and conspiracy theories. But there are also serious Japanese books about the Jews and Israel. A Japanese scholar, specializing in Yiddish literature, recently taught Yiddish to Israeli students at my university. And a Japanese architect, Isamu Noguchi, designed the garden of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

Japanese businessmen, scholars, and diplomats often tell me that when they stayed in the United States, their best friends were Jews. It seems that there is something in these two peoples which attracts them to each other. The cooperation between Japan and Israel, and between Japanese Americans and American Jews, will invigorate them, invigorate America, and invigorate the world. It should also spur cooperation with other Asian countries, and other Asian groups in the United States, like the Chinese and the Koreans, who also come from great Asian civilizations that share many values with the Jews. Los Angeles, the probable capital of the Pacific Rim in the next century, is the proper place for such ties to be initiated and fostered.

BEN-AMI SHILLONY is also the author of *Revolt in Japan: The Young Officers and the February 26, 1936 Incident* (Princeton, 1973) and *Politics and Culture in Wartime Japan* (Oxford, 1981).
