

**Mind to Meme:  
Uncovering the Origins of Shared Consciousness  
Between **Judaism** and **Tibetan Buddhism****

**Towards a Science of Consciousness Conference**

**Tucson, Arizona  
April 8 – 12, 2004**

**Gilah Yelin Hirsch**

**2412 Oakwood Ave  
Venice, California, 90291  
(310-821-6848)  
[www.gilah.com](http://www.gilah.com)**

**© 2004, Gilah Yelin Hirsch**

I was born in the mid 40's and was brought up in an ethnocentric Jewish ghetto of 120,000 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. My first language was Yiddish, and my second was French, learned as I played with the French Canadian kids on the block. My third and fourth languages were English and Hebrew, studied simultaneously in the Jewish Peretz Day School, in which half the day's work was in Yiddish and Hebrew and the other half in English and French. Non-Jews were referred to as gentiles, and I did not know any until high school. I never saw a black person until my first trip to New York City when I was 14. My milieu was entirely Jewish, hailing from deeply Jewish parents – father Ezra Yelin, atheist Talmudic scholar; his father, a rabbi and “Rosh Yeshiva” (head of the Yeshiva) in Bialystock, Poland. My paternal great-grandfather, Rabbi Aryeh Layb Yelin, wrote one of the commentaries on the Talmud, “Yafeh Aynayim” in the Bavli Talmud. My mother, renowned Canadian writer/poet, chronicled Jewish life in Montreal, founded the first Jewish kindergarten at the Jewish Peretz School, and later was a founding member of the first Reconstructionist synagogue, Dorshei Emet, in Montreal. I went to Jewish schools, and spent all my summers from 4 to 17 at Jewish summer camps conducted in Hebrew. I was a questioning atheist from very early childhood, but insatiably, learned everything I could about Judaism.

As far as I know, no one in my milieu had ever heard of Tibet. When I was 14, I found a used book, *The 13<sup>th</sup> Candle*, by Lobsang Rampa in an occult bookstore. I read it voraciously, hungrily. Life in a medieval Tibetan monastery seemed strangely familiar on some level, and on that mysterious level I was determined to one day find Tibet.

In the intervening years between leaving Montreal in 1962 and ultimately reaching Tibet, I never heard of Tibet. It was not until 1979, when I was a visiting artist in London, that I met a Canadian politician who told me that he could speak Tibetan slang and that he had met the Dalai Lama.

Over the years I had become increasingly interested in anything Chinese, considered myself a Sinophile, and was determined to go first to China en route to Tibet. I was ignorant of the tragic history that had taken place in Tibet since the late 50's. I knew nothing about the genocide perpetrated by the Chinese.

From 1974 (until 1981), I spontaneously began to make paintings on circular canvases. These became more and more metaphysical in form and content, many incorporating Hebrew letters and words, with some reference to Kabbala. It was not until the early 80's that I encountered the mandala, an ancient form of image

making, reflecting unity of body and soul, adopted by early Tantric Hinduism and later by Tantric Buddhism.

In 1975, a close friend startled me when she showed me her new Chinese ring. It was a simple silver band, distinguished by carefully engraved leaves all around. I instantly read the Hebrew word “Ashem” (guilt – or could it have been a form of “Hashem”, the secular name used for God by Orthodox Jews?) as it sprang out at me from the “leaves”. It seemed so clear, as if it had been systematically encrypted in that innocuous leafy pattern.

Jews in China? I had never heard of anything like this before. However, this vision remained etched in my memory.

By the early 1980’s I had discovered the writings of Alexandra David-Neel. I devoured “Magic and Mysticism in Tibet” as well as her many other works, and my desire to follow her tracks, both physically and metaphysically, was ardently kindled.

In 1985 I was awarded a substantial NEA Grant for my painting and decided to take a sabbatical from University teaching the following year and spend the time and the money in 15 Asian cultures – and to go at long last to Tibet. The thrust behind this journey was to study things considered sacred in 15 Asian cultures, to understand the relation between philosophy/psychology/psychiatry and medicine in the East; and to photograph alphabets of Asia to augment my developing theory on the origin of alphabet.

Years of long solitary sojourns in nature had led me to believe that all alphabets, ancient and modern, were based on five patterns that I had isolated and “read” in nature. These forms mirror the shapes of neurons and neural processes involved in perception and cognition. I believed that what I called “alphabetic morphology” was universal, as these forms were recognized because they reflected healthful paradigmatic systems in human physiology, from the form of DNA to the configuration of neurons. I first “read” the landscape in Hebrew, and later saw that I could read other languages as well in roots, rocks, and trees. Researching ancient alphabets, I found that Ancient Semitic, also known as Old Hebrew, was the first alphabet after hieroglyphs, and that the original forms of the 27 forms of that alphabet were to be found in all subsequent alphabets. I first presented my budding hypothesis, called *Cosmography: The Writing Of The Universe*, as a slide show documenting alphabet in nature as I had photographed it, to the Council Grove

Conference of the Menninger Foundation in 1983. My intention was to gather more evidence from different parts of the world to show the universal and predictable nature of this hypothesis.

Therefore my worldwide travels always included photographing alphabetic patterns in nature as well as photographing any ancient and contemporary writings to show congruency between the forms. To this end I scoured bookstores, old to new architecture that might have some sort of inscriptions, as well as the indigenous landscape, which invariably, and by this time reliably, was reflected in the writings. I also began to note that the shapes of architecture, dance, and art in all cultures that lasted throughout time, were also constructed of these same forms.

In September, 1986, I found myself in a tiny teeming bookstore in Shanghai, bursting with books in Chinese. My eye was caught by a yellow book jacket, sporting a Star of David and English print - *Jews in Old China: Studies by Chinese Scholars*, (translated, compiled and edited by Sidney Shapiro, Hippocrene Books, New York, 1984). Could it be that the “guilt” ring had been wrought by a Jew in old China?

I still had ten months left to this trip. My material life had been calculatedly restricted to a backpack, and any additional weight was to be shunned. Yet I had to buy the book when I saw the photographs of Hebrew prayers written in the 8<sup>th</sup> C in what came to be known as Tibet, and learned of the great Jewish city of Kaifeng, 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> C. I was stunned. Maybe the supposition I had proposed in *Cosmography* was correct: that there had been a migration of Jews from the middle east northward, taking their alphabet with them, all the way to northern China, and...

When I got to Tibet and photographed the Tibetan alphabet – amidst the horrendous rubble of mass destruction of an entire people systematically plundered and subjugated by the Chinese, (even then I experienced blaring Chinese propaganda 24 hours a day), I saw again the similarities in pattern to the ancient Semitic forms I had observed and photographed in the ground, originally in Southern California.

I was deeply moved by being in Lhasa, Tibet. The first night I dreamed that I was a French nun of the 17<sup>th</sup> C, a Franciscan, dressed in a brown habit, my black hair cut into a square do. I was traveling in the “Snow Mountains” looking for my lost brethren who had fallen into a hole in those exotic and inaccessible Himalayas. In the dream, I, too, fell into that hole and found myself in a secret kingdom of

temples, bridges, and rivers. I drew a map of the dreamed domain, and still have the image vividly in my mind.

In Sarnath, India, I went to the Tibetan Library and Archives and there found a chart delineating the evolution of ancient Asian alphabets. Surely there was an error on the chart. Tibetan was said to have originated in Pali, while I, going simply by similarity in form, was certain that it must have come from Mongolia. Later, befriended by Ngawangdhondhup Narkyid, (Kuno), Official Biographer of the Dalai Lama, my idea was corroborated. Kuno, the linguist, who had arrived at the same conclusion as I had, looking at the history, rather than the form, and had refuted the prevailing notion a year prior at an international conference in Vienna.

I met with Kuno in his office in the residence of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India. Days of in depth conversations later, I showed him the map I had made of the secret kingdom in the “Snow Mountains”. He removed a book from his shelf and showed me an identical map, the home of the Bon religion, prior to Tibetan Buddhism. While there Kuno took it upon himself to instruct me in diverse aspects of ritual, ceremony, history and theology of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, knowing full well that I am Jewish and that I had no intention of leaving my background.

The friendship with Kuno continued long after I had returned to California nine months later. My visit to Tibet and India had indeed brought me an education of breadth and profundity. My interest in Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism was greatly enhanced and elaborated. And my alphabetic quest was complete.

Two more visits to India ensued, the last being in 1998. During each of these visits to Dharamsala, I lived in the compound of the Dalai Lama’s monastery, Thekchen Choeling, where I engaged in intensive research and study in Tibetan Buddhist psychiatry, medicine, philosophy and theology. It was then that I noticed that I was hardly the only Jew closely interested and involved with the Dalai Lama’s Geludpa sect.

As far as I could tell Jews were not that attracted to the other three Tibetan Buddhist sects. What was it that so attracted the Jews to this one?

In 1990 the Dalai Lama invited a group of Rabbis to discuss survival tactics and similarities between Jews and Tibetans in the Diaspora. This was recorded in the book, *The Jew in the Lotus* (Kamenetz), and was later adapted into a documentary film of the same name. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama said in the October 1990, Tibetan-Jewish dialogue, “When we became refugees, we knew that our struggle

would not be easy. It will take a long time, generations. Very often we would refer to the Jewish people, how they kept their identity and faith despite such hardship and so much suffering. And when external conditions were ripe, they were ready to rebuild their nation. So you see, there are many things to learn from our Jewish brothers and sisters”.

I, meanwhile, continued to write and present theories based on the studies in Thekchen Choeling. For example, I believed that there is a congruency between the western scientific knowledge and medical use of calcium, and the Tibetan Buddhist visualization practice of Boddhicita, (*A Conjecture on the Relation between Calcium and Boddhicita: Cultural Interlocuters of Health and Right Action*, Gilah Yelin Hirsch, 2001). This idea has been corroborated by the highly respected Tibetan Geshe, Tsultim Gyeltson, who resides in Long Beach, California.

Although I have never been a practicing Tibetan Buddhist, I have been most interested in the philosophy as it shapes the behavior of each individual in that nation.

A new idea began to take hold. I had become interested in memes.

‘The term “meme” was coined by the celebrated Richard Dawkins in his influential 1976 book, *The Selfish Gene*. Memes, Dawkins said, are self-replicating bits of coded information that take up residence in our brains, like parasites, and pass from organism to organism via a series of entirely physical causes and effects like the one involved in your reading this page: a matter of ink, paper, light, neural impulses, and electro-chemical changes. Like genes, in other words, memes disseminate and reproduce by means of animals like us, without particular regard for the individual hosts or even for the species as a whole...Also like genes, memes are selfish: they care only about reproducing themselves through time, nothing else. But they are new, in evolutionary terms, because they are not physical codes for particular adaptive organisms, like genes are, or are they simply ideational means of furthering the survival of given organisms, as in, say, the developed ability to wield tools. “Memes and genes may often reinforce each other,” Dawkins noted, “but they sometimes come into opposition,” as, for example in the meme for celibacy, which is genetically doomed but may, under certain conditions – in a theocracy, say – be culturally persistent. A more vivid, if fanciful, example: violent video games or action movies, which seem to demonstrate high memetic success, might prove genetically disadvantageous if they encourage pointless social violence.’

‘Although memes need material hosts to live, the information they code does not necessarily have to do with the biological organism itself, or its chances of evolutionary success, but instead with various catchy ideas, memorable songs, well-turned phrases, enduring literary themes, and useful mathematical equations – among other cultural programming that realizes itself through us. “All that is necessary is that the brain should be capable of imitation,” Dawkins concluded, and “memes will then evolve that exploit the capability to the full.” His own tentative list of meme examples ca 1976, included “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots, or building arches. He talked of belief in God, and the tune Auld Lang Seine,” of the stiletto heel and *Jewish religious law* (italics GYH): memes of varying degrees of short and long-term success, passed from host to host through causal exchanges of sound waves, paper, light. “When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain,” psychologist N. K. Humphrey wrote, “turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell.” Memes, Dawkins argues, are highly successful and rapid replicators, compared to genes, and they exhibit a range of benignity with respect to the host, from memes that actually impair our thoughts (belief in God, for him, is one such) to more useful “symbiont” memes that make life more interesting, and possibly better in other ways too.’

‘As material structure,’ the nanotechnologist BC Crandall puts it, “memes are always on their way, transformationally, from medium to medium: speech vibrates air molecules that, if near an ear, enter the brain through the tuning forks of the inner ear and thus into more or less stable molecular patterns in the brain.” They travel via the mouth in words or lyrics, from the hands in gestures or the use of tools. In all cases of such transfer, what we call culture is really a matter of matter, for, as Dawkins says, “the computers in which memes live are human brains.” (‘Viral Culture: A Fashionable Theory Takes The Self Out of Consciousness’, by Mark Kingwell, Harper’s, April 1999)

Susan Blackmore, in her book *The Meme Machine* (Oxford University Press, 1999, forward by Richard Dawkins, Chapter 2, p. 11), describes memes as evolutionary algorithms. While Daniel Dennet (1995) has described the whole evolutionary process as an algorithm, that is, a mindless procedure, which, when followed, must produce an outcome.

“Algorithms are ‘substrate-neutral’, meaning they can run on a variety of different materials. A human with a pencil and paper, a hand-cranked adding machine, and a

digital computer can all follow the same algorithm for some mathematical procedure and come to the same answer. The substrate does not matter – only the logic of the procedure does. In the case of Darwin’s own argument the substrate was living creature and a biological environment, but as Dennett points out this logic would apply equally to any system in which there was heredity, variation, and selection. This, again, is the idea of Universal Darwinism.”

“Algorithms are also completely mindless. If a system is set up so that it follows a given procedure then it does not also need a little mind, or extra something, inside to make it work. It just must mindlessly happen. This is why Dennett describes Darwin’s theory as ‘a scheme for creating Design out of Chaos without the aid of Mind’ (1995, p. 50). ”

I arrived at an idea: Suppose that along with the transfer of alphabet as it was brought north to China, the memes of Judaism were also transported. Behavior, thought pattern, social practice could have been disseminated along the way. I speculated that if indeed the Jews were powerful in Kaifeng, there could have been intermarriage with the Chinese Emperors, who then could have intermarried their daughters with the Tibetan feudal lords. This would have accounted for not only a memetic transference but also a genetic physiognomic transference. I had noticed that the Geludpa sect, the Dalai Lama’s sect, had long thin faces, Semitic shaped heads, while the other three sects are more round-shaped, Mongolian in look. The Geludpa sect is distinguished by the emphasis on debate, interpretation, intense intellectual pursuit, twenty years of monastic training in liturgy, writing of commentary, commentary on commentary, while the other three sects are more animist and atavist, less word based, while more magical in thinking. Geludpas do consult the oracle, and have visionary aspects in their tradition, but are more weighted in the tradition of scripture, debate and interpretation.

True, Tibetan Buddhism is essentially a monastic religion while Judaism is a householder/ family based religion. Yet the more I thought about it, the more I was dazzled by the commonalities that I kept uncovering.

In order to confirm this notion, I initiated an inquiry into the history of the ancient Jews in China, that led to a study of the ancient Jews in India, that led finally to the pivotal clue that Lama Tsonkapa, who was responsible for reforming the Gelupga sect of Tibetan Buddhism, could have indeed been present in Kaifeng during its intellectual zenith around 1372 CE, absorbing and carrying the prevalent memetic ideas with him to Tibet to establish the first Gelupga monastery in Central Tibet, known as Ganden Monastery, in 1409.

This sweeping saga begins in the biblical First Book of Kings and Second Chronicles (10<sup>th</sup> C BCE) where one reads that King Shelomo (Solomon) “exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom”. While wisdom is an ephemeral commodity, accrued through experience and understanding the nature of consequence, the bible suggests that riches, including ivory, apes, peacocks and pepper, were brought from India by sea.

Meanwhile, the earliest known texts in any Indo-European language were written in Sanskrit in India, between 3000-1000 BC. Of the four Vedic texts, comprising the canon of orthodox Hinduism, the first, a collection of hymns, known as the *Rig Veda*, was written towards the end of the second millennium. Around 800 BC, *The Upanishads*, appeared, forming the basic text for popular Hinduism and later Buddhism. The teachings of the Buddha, (Gautama Sakyamuni) who died in 483 BC, were at first passed on orally by his followers and were later collected and written down. The *Jatakas* (stories about the deeds of the Buddha) and the *Dhammapada* (a collection of sayings), were considered of literary merit. The two great Hindu epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabarata*, (that includes the *Bhagavad Gita*) were probably composed between 200 BC and 200 AD.

Simultaneously in China, the first of the books known as the *Confucian Classics*, which contain the teachings of Confucius together with books of ritual and religious song, was the *I-Ching*, dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> C BC. This was written in Kuwen, the literary language of the time that remained unchanged for centuries.

Much is written about the merchant sea trade in the Old Testament, and in the 8<sup>th</sup> C BC, the Book of Isaiah mentions the Jews of Sinim (Sin being the Hebrew word for China, and Sinim denotes Chinese people). Rather than the impression one receives in grade school bible stories of isolated nomads in a sleepy, pre-technological globe, the scholar is dazzled by a bustling ancient world of traders, explorers, far-reaching import and export businesses, growing medical and scientific knowledge, and exceptionally wide-ranging interchanges in the intellectual arenas of literature, mythology, theology, philosophy, art, music and architecture.

While the first exile of the Jews to Babylon was in 586 BC, after Babylon crushed Judah, they were able to return to Palestine and rebuild their temple fifty years later. By the mid 4<sup>th</sup> C BC, Greeks under Alexander of Macedon conquered Palestine, but the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem and the temple in 164 BC and in 143 BC re-established Judah under the Hashomonean Dynasty, only to be

conquered again by the Romans in 63 BC and named Judea. In 70 CE, after a series of national revolts Judea was again conquered by the Romans and the second temple was destroyed. In 35 AD, the Romans defeated the Bar Cochba revolt and Jews were expelled from Jerusalem. From then on Jews were prohibited from entering that city and not even allowed to be within viewing distance. The great dispersal of the Jews, the Diaspora, began at that time.

By the first C BC writings exist in which King Solomon and the Buddha, who respectively lived in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> C BC, share identical legends, such as the two mothers who both claim the single living baby, (*Jataka Tales*). In the 1<sup>st</sup> C CE, Hellenic Greece, Josephus writes about the martyrdom in Masada, in the Israeli desert, comparing their valor to that of Indians. The *Talmud*, (1-6<sup>th</sup> C CE) contains several references to India as well.

The Jews were the trading links between Christian Europe and Hindu-Buddhist India. Jews also traded with Muslims, held high ranks in Muslim courts, and in the 8<sup>th</sup> C Muslim Caliph Es-Saffah, sent a Jew to India to learn and bring mathematics to the west. He returned with arithmetic, and the concept of zero, originally conceived as a philosophical/theological concept of emptiness, later to known as Shunyata. The “Arabic” numbering system was thus a misnomer due to a misperception in the Middle Ages.

Although no word (still) exists in Tibetan for Jew, there is evidence that Jewish settlements not only surrounded Tibet, but that Jews were active traders in the Tibetan city of Khotan, 2<sup>nd</sup> CE, and on the Silk Route throughout Central Asia, and China. The first hard evidence of Jews in China discovered in Luoyang, capital of China in Han, consisted of three stone fragments, written in Palmyrian Hebrew, dating them around the 2<sup>nd</sup> C CE.

The Jews of Kaifeng played the most decisive role of all the Jews who entered China. While many had come through the trade routes directly to Kaifeng, others had left their native land in the 70s of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C BC and settled in the Bombay district of India. They remained there for 1100 years until the mid or end of 11<sup>th</sup> C when they sailed for China and took up residence in Kaifeng. They came for commercial gain and because they had some liking for China. Not all the Jews of Kaifeng came in this manner. Some of them, probably a minority, may have come directly from Persia, therefore the Kaifeng commemorative tablets thrice state their origin as “Tianzhu” (India) and in one case a “Xiyu” (Western Regions, including Persia).

By the beginning of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), the large and flourishing Jewish city of Kaifeng was the pivotal center of Jewish culture as practiced in many other cities in China. Jews were heartily welcomed by all dynastic emperors as the form of Judaism practiced by the Kaifeng Jews was pre Hasmonian, (pre second C BC), and was deemed by the Chinese to be almost identical to Confucianism and the practice of the Five Cardinal Virtues. Therefore, during the Song, Jin 1115-1279) and Ming (1368-1644) periods, the Jews of Kaifeng built and rebuilt their “Purity and Truth Temple” three times, and became prominent in government, science, commerce and the arts. Because of the welcoming ease of living with the Han community, intermarriage between Jews and Han began to be practiced. My hunch is that marriage choices would have been among people whose memetic quotient was congruent, i.e. their world-view, philosophy and life style overlapped, thus strengthening the profile of the Gelupga-to-be.

The absorption of the Jews was so accepted that the Song Dynasty passed a specific law relating to intermarriage: a foreigner who had lived in China for at least three generations and at least one member of his family had held an official post, was permitted to marry an Imperial Princess. With this sanction, mixed genetic/memetic gene pools within the Imperial Dynasties were encouraged, and eventually some of the offspring were married to Tibetan Feudal lords.

Support of intermarriage led to the loss of most of Jewish rites and customs by the 14<sup>th</sup> C. By continuous assimilation over generations Jews became indistinguishable in dress, customs and lifestyle from the Chinese. By the mid 1800s the Jews, as a conspicuous people, had virtually disappeared.

Returning to my original hypothesis, evidence confirmed that there was a massive migration of Jews from the Middle East, who reached China and Tibet at least by the 2<sup>nd</sup> CE, and who intermarried with the Chinese. Intermarriage with the Han led to a mixed genetic/memetic strain, and emperors were known to marry their daughters to Tibetan feudal lords.

At this point in my inquiry, I was still missing the link of the arrival of Buddhism to Kaifeng in the period while the “Temple of Purity and Truth” existed and Judaism was still practiced. Although the originally arriving Jews to Kaifeng practiced pre-Hasmonian Judaism (pre 2<sup>nd</sup> C BC), the continuous arrival of Hebrew traders brought with them the later versions of Judaism, that included the *Talmud* and the *Kabbalah*. When one compares the tenets and practices of these

forms of Judaism and Tantric Buddhism, one can readily suggest a confluence of the two.

I was searching for a movement, a document or preferably a person, analogous to Christians telling of the arrival of Apostle Thomas, to Cochin, India in 52 CE to tell his fellow Jews about his purported messiah, that could pinpoint the arrival of Buddhism to Kaifeng.

Learning of Lama Tzongakapa Lozang Drakpa's arrival to the region of U-Tsang from Amdo in 1372 puts him at least in proximity if not in Kaifeng at that time. Lama Tzongkapa had studied Tantric Buddhism in India and was known to be at least in U-Tsang before he returned to Tibet where he reformed the Gelupga sect and founded the first Gelupga Monastery in 1409.

Given the proclivities of humankind, it would not be too farfetched to suggest that visiting intellectuals in or around Kaifeng would meet in the proliferating cafes of Scarlet Sparrow Street to discuss and debate ideas. As both Jews and Tibetan Buddhists share debate and commentary embedded in their study and practice, this would seem to be a natural probability. While at this time, I do not have hard evidence to say that it was Lama Tzongkapa who actually incorporated the Judaic practices into his new version of Tibetan Buddhism, it would be safe to suggest that he, and/or other visiting scholars became familiar with each other's philosophical and religious tenets, and that they may have adapted them into their own.

Although the influence of Kaifeng Jewish ideas on Tzongkapa and his followers may seem speculative, it is difficult to discount all together, when one realizes that a greater preponderance of Jews seem to associate themselves with Tibetan Buddhism, particularly with the Geludpa sect, than with any other sects of Buddhism.

It would also seem probable that some of those early genetic/memetic mixes between Kaifeng Jews and Han Chinese, particularly after the Song law permitting and thus encouraging intermarriage between foreigners and Han, began to change the physiognomies of future generations who may have intermarried with Tibetans. As recently as 1937, Scottish missionary, Reverend Thomas Torrance, who first visited Chengdu in 1918, citing various similarities in language, liturgy and customs, wrote that the Chang Min are descendants of the ancient Israelites who arrived in China several hundred years before Christ and "they retain unquestionable marks of being members of the Israelitish branch of the Semitic

race...” Sino-Tibetan scholar Perlmann, recently speculated that “*there are Jews among the Tibetans, that they are, in fact, descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel*”. Similarly, British author Thomas Manning wrote, “*the Tibetans look more like Jews than Mongols*”.

By the time I had concluded my research on the history of the Jews in China, I had learned that some of the descendants of the Kaifeng Jews still live on what is now called Scripture Teaching Religion Southern Lane, and are known for their silver smithing, among other occupations. I now believe, that indeed, the engraved silver ring that I had been shown in 1974, the ring that had precipitated this vivid search, could have been fabricated by a descendent of the Kaifeng Jews – perhaps in the Wan Fu Silver Shop or the Ji Feng Silver Shop, both on Gu Lou Street.

Given the information amassed, I suggest that contemporary Tibetans are at least, in part, descendants of the ancient Jews. It would be interesting to conduct DNA studies on the southern borders of Tibet, the northern borders of China, and the Gelupga sect in Dharamsala, India. The commonality between the Jewish and Tibetan “brothers and sisters”, as the Dalai Lama put it, can begin to illuminate other areas of seeming ethnic and ideological differences leading towards greater unity, as we hopefully approach an era of universally expanding compassion.

**COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL PERIODS**  
**DYNASTIC CHINA AND ANCIENT ISRAEL**

**XIA** **2140-1711 BC**

**SHANG** **1711- 1066 BC**

**CHINA: WESTERN ZHOU** **1066-771 BC**

**930 BC** KINGDOM OF ISRAEL SPLIT INTO ISRAEL, IN THE NORTH, AND JUDAH IN THE SOUTH. TEN OF THE 12 TRIBES IN ISRAEL, TWO IN JUDEA.

**CHINA: EASTERN ZHOU** **770-256 BC**

**722 BC** ASSYRIA DESTROYS ISRAEL AND TAKES THE TEN TRIBES INTO CAPTIVITY. THESE ARE SCATTERED AND GRADUALLY VANISH.

**586 BC** BABYLON CRUSHES JUDAH, DESTROYS THE TEMPLE AND TAKES NEARLY THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF THE TWO TRIBES INTO CAPTIVITY, KNOWN AS THE BABYLONIAN EXILE.

**50 YEARS LATER** PERSIA HAVING DEFEATED BABYLOINIA PERMITS THE JEWS TO RETURN TO PALESTINE.

**MID 5<sup>TH</sup> C BC** JERUSALEM RESTED AND THE TEMPLE REBUILT.

**5<sup>TH</sup> – 4<sup>TH</sup> C BC** PERSIANS SHIFT SOME JEWS INTO PERSIA AND THE MEDIA ON THE SOUTHERN SHORE OF THE CASPIAN SEA.

**CHINA: WARRING STATES 475 –221 BC**

MID – 4<sup>TH</sup> C BC GREEKS UNDER ALEXANDER OF MACEDON,  
CONQUER PALESTINE

**CHINA: WESTERN HAN 206 BC – 25 AD**

164 BC MACCABEES RECAPTURE JERUSALEM AND THE  
TEMPLE.

143 BC JUDAH RE-ESTABLISHED UNDER HASHMONEAN  
DYNASTY.

63 BC CONQUERED BY THE ROMANS AND NAMED JUDEA.

**CHINA: EASTERN HAN 25-220 AD**

70 AD AFTER A SERIES OF NATIONAL REVOLTS, AGAIN CONQUERED  
BY THE ROMANS, THE SECOND TEMPLE  
DESTROYED.

35 AD DEFEAT BY THE ROMANS OF THE BAR COCHBA  
REVOLT. JEWS EXPELLED FROM JERUSALEM.

FORMATION OF YAVNEH: THE WRITING OF THE TALMUD  
FOR THE NEXT 600 YEARS.

AFTER 35 AD JEWS PROHIBITED FROM ENTERING  
JERUSALEM, NOT EVEN ALLOWED TO BE WITHIN VIEWING  
DISTANCE.

2<sup>ND</sup> C AD EVIDENCE OF JEWS IN TIBETAN CITY OF  
KHOTAN AND ON THE SILK ROUTE THROUGHOUT CENTRAL  
ASIA, AND CHINA.

2<sup>ND</sup> C AD THE FIRST EVIDENCE OF JEWS IN CHINA  
DISCOVERED IN LUOYANG, CAPITAL OF CHINA IN HAN,  
CONSISTED OF THREE STONE FRAGMENTS, WRITTEN IN  
PALMYRIAN HEBREW.

**THREE KINGDOMS**

**220-280**

**WESTERN JIN** 265-317

**EASTERN JIN** 317-420

**SOUTHERN AND NORTHERN DYNASTIES** 420-589

**SUI** 589-618

**TANG** 618 –907

**FIVE DYNASTIES** 907-960

**NORTHERN SONG** **960-1127**

JEWISH CITY OF KAIFENG (BIANLING) ACKNOWLEDGED

**JIN (GOLDEN TARTARS)** **1115-1279**

FIRST SYNAGOGUE CONSTRUCTED IN 1163 IN KAIFENG

**SOUTHERN SONG** 1279-1368

**YUAN** 1279-1279

**MING** **1368-1644**

TEMPLE OF TRUTH AND PURITY (REBUILDING)

INSCRIPTIONS 1489, 1512, 1663

**QING** **1644-1911**

KAIFENG AND JEWS DISAPPEARED BY MID 1800S

**REPUBLIC** **1911 O**

AS OF 1980 THERE WERE STILL 140 FORMER JEWISH KAIFENG FAMILIES IN CHINA WITH 6 SURNAMEN. OF THESE 79 (ABOUT 166 PEOPLE) FAMILIES LIVE IN KAIFENG, 61 MOVED TO OTHER PARTS OF THE COUNTRY.

*Compiled by Gilah Yelin Hirsch from primarily from the JEWS OF OLD CHINA, Sydney Shaprio, Hippocrene Books, Inc, NY, and 1984, as well as other sources as listed in the Bibliography,*

**TIMELINE**  
**JEWS IN KAIFENG AND TIBET**  
**&**  
**TIBETANS/TZONGKAPA IN CHINA AND TIBET**

<b>JEWS IN KAIFENG AND TIBET</b>	<b>TIBETANS/TZONGKAPA IN CHINA AND TIBET</b>
<p data-bbox="186 863 727 1031">2<sup>ND</sup> C AD Evidence of Jews in Tibetan city of Khotan and on the Silk Route throughout Central Asia, and China.</p> <p data-bbox="186 1077 748 1287">2<sup>ND</sup> C AD. The first evidence of Jews in China discovered in Luoyang, capital of China in Han, consisted of three stone fragments, written in Palmyrian Hebrew</p>	<p data-bbox="776 632 1338 835">Chinese Chiang tribes herded sheep and cattle in eastern Central Sia up to the furthest north-west borders of China many centuries before the Christian era.</p> <p data-bbox="776 1268 1300 1352">7<sup>th</sup> C onwards Tibet beings new period of growth and development.</p> <p data-bbox="776 1398 1344 1900">Political history of the period of the Yarlung Kings (7thC – 9<sup>th</sup>C) is one of constant activity. Moved into China, even captured Sian, capital of China, by occupying strategic points on the routes of central Asia. Diminished China’s communication with the West and greatly strained China’s resources. “...Tibetans are a fierce and warlike nature, are steadfast in purpose, intelligent and industrious, intent on learning undistractedly...”</p>

<p><u>NORTHERN SONG 960-1127</u> Jewish city of Kaifeng (Bianling) acknowledged.</p> <p><u>JIN (GOLDEN TARTARS) 1115-1279</u> First synagogue constructed in 1163 in Kaifeng.</p> <p>SOUTHERN SONG 1279-1368</p> <p>YUAN 1279-1279</p> <p><u>MING</u> <u>1368-1644</u> Jewish Temple of Purity and Truth (rebuilding) inscriptions 1489, 1512, 1663.</p>	<p>9<sup>th</sup> C Tantra introduced to Tibet</p> <p>Up to 1200 India still had everything to offer in Buddhist studies, and so it was the age of Great Translators.</p> <p>In 1368 the Yuan Dynasty came to an end in China when the Mongols were overthrown, and the Ming Dynasty, with its Chinese Emperors, was founded.</p> <p>1372 Tsongkapa Lozang Drakpa, founder of the reformed Gelugpa sect, came to the region of U-Tsang from Amdo.</p> <p>1409 Tsongkapa founded the first Gelugpa monastery in Central Tibet, Ganden Monastery, that became the third largest in Tibet housing 3300 monks.</p> <p>1416 Jamyang Choje (1379-1449), disciple of Tsongkapa, founded the Drepung Monastery, with financial</p>
--	--

assistance of New Namkha Zangpo. In time Drepung became the largest monastery in Tibet, housing 7700 monks. Sera monastery became the second largest, housing 5500, founded in 1419 by Janchen Choje.

Tsongkapa died 25<sup>th</sup> day of the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the Earth-Hog year 1419.

First Dalai Lama was named Gedun Truppa. Born in 1391 at Shabtod in Tsang. He took his vows as Getsul, the first stage of monkhood, before Trurpa Sherab at Narthang monastery in 1405. Studied extensively in philosophy and Buddhist religion. In 1415 met Tsongkhapa, founder of Gelupka sect and became one of his most important disciples. The Great monastery of Tashilhunpo at Shigatse was founded by Gedun Truppa in 1447, with financial help from Pon Palzang. The monastery housed about 3000 monks and Gedun Truppa, now famous in Tibet as a Buddhist scholar, became its abbot and was called Panchen Gedun Truppa. He died at Tashilhunpo in 1474 at 84.

## QING

1644-1911

Kaifeng Jews disappeared by mid 1800s.

## REPUBLIC

1911 ON

As of 1980 there were still 140 former Jewish Kaifeng families in

China with 6 surnames. Of these 79 (about 166 people) families live in Kaifeng, 61 moved to other parts of the country.

1937 Scottish missionary Thomas Torrance produced his work "China's First Missionaries: Ancient Israelites", a culmination of his ideas concerning the origins and life of the Chiang-Min: "retain unquestionable marks of being members of the Israelitish branch of the Semitic race... unmistakable Semitic features." Many customs common to ancient Israelite religion. Chiang-Min believe in one God and serve the Aabbah Molan, reminiscent of the Israelite Malach or Messenger of God (angel). "...people have a moan or cry of a 'Yawei' sound - very suggestive... of the biblical name of God." Chiang conception of sacrifice came from the Israelites; plough used similar to ancient Israelite plough and drawn by two oxen, e.g. stipulation in Deut. 22:10 "You shall not plough with an ox and ass together"; like priests of ancient Israelites wear girdles to bind their robes, and bear sacred rods shaped like serpents, like Biblical Nehushtan (brass serpent made by Moses): Numbers 21:9; 11 Kings 18:4.

## **JEWISH MYSTICAL TRADITION** **&** **THE GEULPGA SECT OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM**

Over the last twenty years many Jews have explored Buddhist teachings. A surprising number have become leaders and teachers in the various sects of Buddhism.

A preponderance of Jews seem to be attracted to Tibetan Buddhism, particularly the Geludpa Sect, headed by the Dalai Lama.

While there are many similarities between the two religions, there is one major difference: Judaism is a householder religion focused on marriage and family. The old law states the student must be married in order to better deal with the relational and sexual aspects of the esoteric studies.

Tibetan Buddhism is primarily a monastic religion.

### **SIMILARITIES**

#### **JUDAISM**

In the Talmudic tradition, students often matched with over theoretical fine points, called *pilpul*.

Yavneh formed by rabbis in first century to preserve the Jewish lore and traditions after expulsion from Judah.

Kabbalistic 4 levels of interpretation: literal, implicative, midrashic, secret. (Pshat, remez, drash and sod = Pardes/Paradise). Goal is to open a person to greater insight, clarity, decision, “purifying the vessel”, changing the human being, making the human being more perfect. “One must always stay in the world of service, can never seek completion outside the world, even the human being who has reached the level of being a knower

#### **TIBETAN BUDDHISM**

Tibetans and Jews are the only religious traditions that incorporate formal debate as part of their religious training.

Gelupga pedagogy hearkens back to days of first century rabbis.

3 tenets: view, (fundamental orientation towards nature; path (method of spiritual improvement through systematic meditations; goal (to become Boddhisatva, whose great compassion will help all sentient beings eliminate their suffering.)

of God or a lover of God” (Omerman).  
3 parts to the spiritual path: prayer, study  
and acts of loving-kindness.  
Ancient Israel knew about India, mentioned  
in the Bible. Josephus writes about India in  
his work about Masada.

Buddha and King Solomon share legends.

Both have angels and manifestations in common.

Cosmology of 4 supernal worlds  
corresponding to the four letters of God’s  
name, yod, he, vov, he; correlated with four  
elements: earth, water, air and fire.

Five elements include Space.

Hasidim wear hats called *streimel*.

These are the same as hats worn by the  
Tibetans, imported originally from Italy by  
Jewish traders.

Hebrew words like ginger, pepper, ivory  
have Sanskrit origins.

Jewish settlements in most of the regions  
surrounding Tibet.

Jews construct memory in the present, and  
by constructs who we are – an insight into  
Buddhist philosophy.

Jews wear the *Tallis*.

Tibetan Buddhists present and wear *Katah*.

Jews were the first refugees to come to  
India.

Tibetan Buddhists are the most recent  
refugees to come to India.

Kabbalah claims ancient origin, passed from  
master to student mainly in oral tradition;  
has drawn its inspiration from canonical  
texts (Genesis, Song of Songs, Ezekial and  
produced major works such as Sefer  
Yetzirah (Book of Formation), Zohar (Book  
of Splendor).

Tibetan Buddhist Tantra derived from Indian  
Hindu tantric texts and practices. (“Tantra”  
refers both to philosophy and texts; the root  
of the word means “web”.)

Kabbalistic image of the “fabric, the  
weaving of life”

The “web of Tantra”.

Ayin Sof – no limit also means “the depth of primordial being is called Boundless. Also called ayen (nothing)

Shunyata = emptiness

Gilgul

Reincarnation

Kavannah

Intention

Goal is to create a garment of light. Each incarnation we weave it a little more or undo some of the threads. Cosmology of 4 supernal worlds corresponding to the four letters of God’s name, yod, he, vov, he; correlated with four elements.

Karma needs to be purified during each lifetime through purgation practices and good deeds. Goal, nirvana, is getting off the wheel of life.

In both the next incarnation is dependent on previous life’s behavior.

Babylonian Exile 586BCE: kept teachings alive and within a generation (516 BCE) returned to land and rebuilt Jerusalem and temple. Exiles recur in 2<sup>nd</sup> C BCE; Religion saved by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zackai who founded Yavneh academy. Further exiles during Spain’s Inquisition 1492; Crusades, Middle Ages; Nazis.

Tibetans exiled in 1959: keeping teachings alive, modernizing the religion and hoping to return to Tibet.

Kabbalistic view: the infinite cannot fit into the finite – the “vessels break”, and there is something wrong with the world....

Buddha’s discovery: the world as appearances is unsatisfactory, (*dukkha*).

Both share problem of how to keep religion in a highly materialistic and secular culture; how to renew without losing community.

Jews revere the ancient written word of the Torah as wisdom.

Tibetans revere the ancient written word of the Sutras (words of Buddha).

Jews are currently in daily peril from Palestinian neighbors.

Tibetans are daily plundered by the Chinese.

Kabbalah

Tantra

Visualization practice: connect oneself with the inner Sefirot on the Tree of Life within to find a better balance, enabling one to align oneself in the Tree of Life beyond. Analogous Kabbalistic physiology in which

Visualization practice: Tankas (religious diagrammatic paintings): integrate method (male, white drops) and wisdom (female, red drops). Yabyum/sexual union. Analogous to physiology.

Sefirot are mapped onto imaginal body parts as a tree. Talmud passage: the mother gives the red, the father gives the white, but God gives sight to the eyes, the hearing to the ears.

“First you visualize that everything is dissolving into the nature of emptiness an form, and that emptiness you visualize is a purified sate of existence, like a purified deity. Then you focus on that purity and see that deity as having a level of inherent existence. Through visualization you bring the practice of method and wisdom together.” (Dalai Lama)

In Buddha Tantra, wisdom is defined as a consciousness that realizes emptiness, or the lack of inherent existence of every phenomenon, “realizing emptiness at the same time it compassionately appears as a deity”. (Daniel Cozort)

Both Kabbalah and Tantra recognize the whole human being and all its impulses, negative and positive.

Jewish legends and Tantric texts share points of similarity, such as the cobbler who accompanies his work with meditations and which draws the stream of emanations down from upper to lower, so transforming profane actions into ritual action.

Judaism is householder religion; even holy man, the tzaddick or prophet, must be part of this world.

Tantrayana practiced by married (householders) in Kagyu sect until 1959. Gelupga sect practices tantra in celibate monastic system. Mysteries of higher tantric meditation reserved for those refined by study, debate, meditation practice.

Jewish mysticism remains closed to most Jews.

Well-preserved, complete, highly developed path of meditation, which they are willing to teach to westerners.

Jews combine Jewish culture and religion into identity.

Tibetans distinguish between culture and religion.

Family is the carrier of the covenant.

“Wheel of life”/ reincarnation

Shekinah

Tara: goddess, when achieved enlightenment asked to be always reincarnated into a woman’s body. Mother is considered the symbol of compassion and affection at the level of practice. Without the female side, wisdom, one

cannot develop.  
Men and women are seen to be equal, but  
word for nun, *ani*, (auntie), means lowborn.

6-pointed Star of David is shield of King David. This symbol originated in Mesopotamia as symbol of fertility, cervix. Esoteric part of a woman's body, hidden in mystery, neck of the womb, channel through which all life emerges, purely and uniquely feminine. At heart of revelation, one finds female images of God. Became Jewish symbol in the Middle Ages. Jewish mother center of family life.

6- pointed star is found in Tankas. Came into India with the Aryans, where it represents Shakti, the Mother; entered Tibet with teachings of Hindu tantric tradition.

Jews excel in Diaspora because of intelligence. Jews are leaders in economy, education, scientific research etc because they are living on the edge, taking risks, and those who study and practice generally have children; consider secular achievements a religious excellence.

Tibetans excel in the Diaspora because of intelligence. Dalai Lama advises to "half/half": fifty percent on religious practice and fifty percent on life.

While both Jews and Tibetan Buddhists realize that their respective exiles have brought their teachings to the west as well as to nations worldwide, both fear losing their religious and cultural identities due to total assimilation into friendly and accommodating host communities.

*Compiled by Gilah Yelin Hirsch © primarily from The Jew in the Lotus (Kamenetz) as well as other sources listed in the Bibliography.*

## Appendix 1

### A Synopsis of the Jews in China And Tibet

*Compiled primarily from the Jews in Old China, (Shapiro), as well as other sources listed in the Bibliography.*

The large-scale dispersal of Jews into the Diaspora began after the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem. Over the next 500 years, thousands of Jews migrated into Persia and Arabia. Of these some continued north into Afghanistan, Balkh, Samarkand and Bokhara, in Central Asia, all on the old Silk Road. Some, probably around the 7<sup>th</sup> C, moved overland from there into northwest China, also known as Chinese Turkestan, where they settled, though not in large number. A few advanced further into North China.

Another part of the Jews in Persia and Arabia migrated south into India, settling mainly in southwest ports along the Arabian Sea. Some of these became merchants and traveled to China on Arab, Persian or Chinese vessels during Tang and Song (7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> C) and settled in seaports on China's southeast coast. Jews still living in Persia may have sailed directly on ships via the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

More Jews arrived in China during the Yuan dynasty (13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> C) when numbers of Middle Easterners and Southern Europeans returned with the conquering Mongol armies. By then cities known or believed to have hosted Jewish communities included Luoyang, Sian, Kaifeng, Dunhuang, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Yangzhou, Canton, Quanzhou, Beijing, Nanjing and Ningxia.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> C, Iraqi Jews, mostly from Baghdad, flocked to the booking port of Shanghai. And the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia brought an influx of Jewish refugees, many dealing in furs, who settled mainly in the northeast (then called Manchuria) and in the seaport of Tientsin (Tianjin).

Finally, several thousand German and Austrian Jews, fleeing Nazi persecution during the late 1930s, settled temporarily in Shanghai, while awaiting visas to other countries.

Today, almost all are gone – the early settlers have gradually been absorbed into the vast one billion Chinese population, the others returning to their native lands or

moving on the countries in other parts of the world. Some historical relics remain, as well as a few people who are of Jewish descent.

While the Western world received reports of Jews in China as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> C, the news in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> C of the discovery of an existing Jewish community in the city of Kaifeng, and the findings there of Jesuit missionaries, created a sensation. Not only were Jews living in Kaifeng, but they had records carved in stone containing detailed accounts of their origins, their history and their beliefs. Since European Catholics were contending that the Talmudists had deliberately tampered with a section of the Old Testament, the Jesuits hoped to find “original materials” in the Kaifeng Scriptures, believed to have been produced before the compilation of the Talmud. This discovery precipitated much sleuthing into the history of the Jews in Kaifeng.

Many still believe the Jews arrived in China before 700 BC. Historian Sionnet gives 3 reasons for his belief in Zhou (770-256 BC) migration of the Jews to China. He cites references in Zhou dynasty folklore to the Tree of Knowledge, the Rainbow After the Deluge, Seven Years of Famine...clear evidence of Jewish influences. He claimed also a mention of Jehovah in the writings of Lao Zi (Lao Tze) 6<sup>th</sup> BC philosopher, and said this could only have been learned from Israelites in China. Many more historians believe Jews fled to China during or before the Han (2<sup>nd</sup> C BC to 3<sup>rd</sup> C AD). Most considered the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans the pivotal cause. Three stone fragments of stone inscriptions discovered in Luoyang, capital of China in Han provided tangible cause as they were written in Palmyrian Hebrew that dated them around the 2<sup>nd</sup> c AD.

Historian An offered two more common practices which support early arrival, although not necessarily as early as Zhou: prohibition against wearing of wool and linen together, found in Deuteronomy 22:11, exists also in China, particularly in Tibet; and the Israelite custom of the younger brother marrying the widow of his deceased older brother in order to carry on the line is alleged to be fairly common in Jinagsu and Henan.

Godbey alleges that Israelites were using silken articles in the 8<sup>th</sup> C BC at which time only China produced silk. Amos 3:12 describes Israelites of Samaria reclining on couches of damask. Thus Israelites in Damascus, Assyria were importing Chinese silk to the west.

Archeological dating begins with the first stone fragment in Palmyrian Hebrew, 1-3<sup>rd</sup> C AD - corresponding to roughly Eastern Han – the language being a branch of Aramaic, the lingua franca of Jews of Western Asia generally. The verb means

“died a violent death.” The subject of the sentence is missing: “...(name of a person) is followed by “died for the sake of her/his co-believers”. The second stone fragment, “...although in good health...Sarh (or Sared) died...” Both names are Palmyrian; and the third stone fragment, “...from Anath...”, suggests a place, a person, (III. Judges 31), a clan, or perhaps a goddess.

Other opinions about estimated departure dates of Jews from their homeland vary from before Moses (prior to 1300 BC) to between the exodus from Egypt and the Assyrian conquest (1300-700 BC), to between Babylonian exile and the Roman conquest (586 BC to 70 AD), to between the start of the Diaspora and the completion of the Talmud (70 to 600 AD).

From 70 AD Jews had no country of their own. Rome had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Before that date because their land was a crossroads between three continents – Europe, Asia and Africa – and international and racial relations were extremely complicated, with constant wars and large shifts in populations, they were unable to live and work in peace. And so, they were constantly on the move. In 135 AD Jews were prohibited from entering their holy city, or from even coming within sight of its walls, on pain of death, This added impetus to the mass Diaspora which had begun in the year 70.

In addition to Jews having had very old cities in Cochin, India, from 70 AD, the “Ten Lost Tribes” divided into two bodies, the first advancing from Persia and Media into China, the second moving north and integrating with the Tartars to become the Khazars. Historian Perlmann, citing existing evidence, believes that most of the “Ten Lost Tribes” remained in Afghanistan, (where they call themselves Ben-I-Israel, or Children of Israel). Other Jews became Kashmiri (around 13<sup>th</sup> C), while another group was formed in Bombay, also calling themselves Ben-I-Israel.

Finn says Kaifeng Jews could not be the “Ten Lost Tribes” because they hail Ezra as their “second law-giver”, the first having been Moses. This means they knew of the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple, 5<sup>th</sup> C BC. And they had a few verses from Daniel, and all of Esther, whom they venerated as the “Great Mother”. Esther was written in 4<sup>th</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> C BC, Daniel in mid 2<sup>nd</sup> C BC coinciding with Antiochus Epiphanus 175-164 BC.

Pan suggests that Kaifeng Jews left their homeland prior to the successful revolt by the Maccabees in 164 BC. “Most Western Jews commemorate the restoration of national independence and freedom of religion resulting from the Hasmonean uprising in the sixties of the 2<sup>nd</sup> C BC by the Feast of Lights, known as Hannukah.

The Kaifeng Jews did not know of this glorious page in their history because it occurred after their departure. Both Bombay and Kaifeng Jews give much prominence to the prayer, “Hear O Israel, remember this! The lord – and the Lord alone – is our God.” It has been customary from earliest times among Jews the world over to recite this prayer, which appears in Deuteronomy 6:4, and well pre-dates the Talmud.

Furthering this idea, the synagogue in both places burned incense during prayer services, a custom followed in Jerusalem only up to but not after the destruction of the Second Temple, 70 AD. Neither community celebrated the Feast of Lights, Hannukah., This is most important because it substantiates the claim of the Bombay Jews that they left Palestine in 175BC.

A minority of the Kaifeng Jews may have come directly from Persia, therefore the Kaifeng commemorative tablets thrice state their origin as “Tianzu” (India) and once as “Xiyu” (Western Regions, including Persia). All agree that Jews were identified in Chinese official documents for the first time, whether by the use of one term or another, during the Yuan Dynasty. 13<sup>th</sup> C

Three stone inscriptions in Chinese commemorating rebuildings of the Kaifeng synagogue, and dated 1489, 1512 and 1663, respectively - offered three different dates for the time of the arrival of the Jews in China: the Song dynasty (960-1279), the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD), as well as the Zhou dynasty (1056 BC to 256 BC), which is also referenced in the prophecy of Isaiah 49:12 (8<sup>th</sup> C BC) that the Jews would be returning from “Sinim”. Since Sinim meant China, this proved that they were already there.

Kaifeng Jews brought cotton to China and silk to Europe. The first of the three inscriptions, 1489, says “entry tribute of Western cloth”, meaning that Jews were cloth merchants. More than 70 clans lived in harmony with Han and Hui (Muslim) Chinese. They were silk traders, manufacturers of gold and silver ornaments, merchants, and were noted for considerable achievements in scientific and cultural fields.

The 1512 tablet in Kaifeng dates the arrival of the Jews as during the reign of Han emperor Ming Di who ruled 58-76 Ad. This is within the first to third C AD period when Palmyrian script was the current form of Hebrew writing in Syria. Jews had built a large synagogue in Palmyria, and were merchants in the large trade center of Antioch that had a population of 600.000. They brought woven silk from the Orient for the Roman market, as well as traded with India, and Ferghana and Tashkent in Central Asia, just west of China’s Zinjiang province today. Jewish

merchants may have joined caravans trekking all the way to Luoyang as Roman coins of several emperors have been discovered in Shanxi province. Palmyrians were wide ranging travelers leaving inscriptions found in Egypt, Rome, England and Germany.

Chinese historian Pan examines some wilder conjectures advanced by various observers. He cites Perlmann's speculation that *there are Jews among the Tibetans*, that they are, in fact, "descendants of the The Lost Tribes of Israel". Pan also quotes the comment of Britisher Thomas Manning that the *Tibetans look more like Jews than Mongols*.

The first synagogue was constructed in 1163 in Kaifeng, then known as Bianliang, located on China's Central Plain, under the Jin Dynasty of the Golden Tartars. "In the first year of the Long Xing period (1163) of Song emperor Xiao Zong, when Wusida Leiwei was the leader of our faithful, the andula commenced the building of our synagogue. It was rebuilt in the 16<sup>th</sup> year of Zhi Yuan period (1279 of Kublai Khan." Wusida is Chinese version of Usta, Persian word for master craftsman, which Persian-speaking Jews converted to indicate Chief Rabbi. Liewei, (Levi). Li was the Han Chinese name adopted by the Liewei, Levi, Israelite family, which was the most flourishing Jewish family at the beginning of the Ming. They were well versed in scriptures, and able to read Hebrew, and nine were manlas (rabbis), from 1436 on.

Kaifeng had the largest Jewish community in China of all the many cities where Jews lived. It lasted the longest, and it is the only one which left substantial records of its own, including three stone stele with inscriptions commemorating the rebuilding of the synagogue called the "Chong Jian Qing Zhen Si Ji" ("A Record of Rebuilding the Purity and Truth Synagogue" as dated in the year of Hong Zhi or 1489). The composers of the Hebrew and Chinese inscription went to pains to stress the similarity of their culture and beliefs to those of the Chinese Confucianists.

In the Cheng Hua period, (1465 –1488), this is reiterated in another inscription: "Our religion and Confucianism differ only in minor details, in mind and deed both respect Heaven's way, venerate ancestors, are loyal to sovereigns and ministers and filial to parents. Both call for harmony with wives and children, respect for rank and for making friends, in short nothing less than the Five (Confucian) Relationships...The Religion was passed onto Ezra, another patriarch of the Correct Religion. His way of worshipping God fully manifested the mysteries of the ancestral Way. The Way has no shape or form, but is above all else...Our religion was transmitted to China from Tianzhu (India). We settled in Kaifeng by

imperial command. More than 70 clans named Li, An, Ai, Gao, Mu, Zhao, Jin, Zhou, Zhang, Shi, Huang, Li, Nie, Jin, Zhang, Zuo, and Pa, arrived during the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127)". Of the 70 or 17 or 7 clans, the main contributors to the 1662 reconstruction of the temple were Shao Chegji, a Defence Commandant of the Kaifeng area, and other financial contributors were clans with 7 surnames –LI, Zhao, Ai, Zhang, Gao, Jin, Shi.

Historical evidence shows that Chinese Jews were known as “Blue Hat Hui Hui, ” from the tradition of wearing white hats of China’s followers of orthodox Islam. Jews were often confused with Muslims as both practiced circumcision, and abstained from pork. The people of the “colored eyes” who came to China as a result of the Mongols’ westward expansion, intermarried with the Han Chinese and proliferated. By Ming, they had become a new race known as Hui. They lived in small settlements all over China, spoke Chinese, but believed in Islam. During the Yuan, the Jews, known as Zhuhu and Wotuo, were also “the people of the colored eyes”.

Jews in China were variously referred to as Wotuo (sounded as Yute =Yehuda), Rudea (Judea) same as Yute – word for Jewish homeland (after the Roman conquest in 63 BC). Jews were also known as Blue Muslims, as they wore blue head coverings, were described as hook-nosed people, called Hui Hui by the Jesuits, Youtai Ren (Jews) and Youtai Jiao (Judaism), Oxi Jiaotu (Disciples of Moses), Zhuwu, Wutuo. Jews were also called Sinew Plucking Religion as Israelites extract the sinews of the cattle and sheep they slaughter to commemorate the famous bible story, found in Isaiah, of how Jacob sustained an injury to his sciatic nerve while wrestling with an angel, and was named Israel. Chinese Jews still maintained this tradition after 1000 years in China. When Jews arrived in Kaifeng they were toting their Scriptures on carrying poles, and so their religion was named the “Tiao Jing Jiao”, meaning “Scripture Toting Religion”, later corrupted and mispronounced as “Tiao Jin Jiao”, meaning Sinew Plucking Religion, which is written with different characters but sounds almost the same. Not until 1911, first year of the Republic of China, was the name changed to the Scripture-Teaching Religion.

Kaifeng Jews were also distinguished by their belief in Jehovah, not worshipping any other gods, and did not marry outside their race or eat pork. They practiced circumcision, rested one day a week (Saturday), prayed three times every day, fasted four times a month, celebrated 7 holy days a year.

There are many records of Jews being awarded special commendations by the emperor, eg. “Physician An Cheng, in the 19th year of the Yong Le period (1421) of Emperor Cheng Zu, was presented with ceremonial incense (money) and authorized by the Prince of Zhou, whose posthumous name was Ding, to rebuild the synagogue...” As early as the Southern Song (1127-1279) the government made provisions for foreign merchants to take official positions. After his family had been living in China for three generations, a “foreigner” could wed an imperial princess if at least one member of his household had an official title.

Scholar Pan writes that by the Northern Song Dynasty, (960-1127), life in Kaifeng was generally affluent, expensive, luxurious, everything available, cafes, restaurants, fancy clothing, etc. One can readily understand why Israelites of the 12thC would have chosen Kaifeng, or Bianling, as a permanent home. Its bustling commerce and prosperity offered many opportunities to earn a livelihood. As the cosmopolitan capital, and as a center of learning and the arts, it was attractive to the intellectuals. Foreigners were no novelty; in fact there was considerable trade with non-Chinese. Kaifeng proved to be an ideal site for a long-term community of Jews. Not only in Northern Song, but during all the succeeding dynasties, they lived relatively unmolested, even flourishing for a time, until they gradually forgot their own traditions and were culturally and physically assimilated into the overwhelming mass of Chinese society.

But by the time American missionary W. A.P Martin visited Kaifeng in 1867 he found the synagogue in ruins. Therefore one can say that the Jewish community of Kaifeng existed from the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup>C to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup>C.

Shapiro writes that a great quantity of Jewish cultural artifacts in China were destroyed between the final years of Yuan and the early Ming. The fundamental case, says Zhu Jiang, was that the “se mu ren” (“people with colored eyes”), and the Jews among them, had served the ruling Mongols in oppressing the Han Chinese. “...When Zhu Yunanzhang, the future first emperor of Ming, was continually victorious against the Yuan in the mid-14thC, the Han population, thirsting for vengeance, wrecked whatever cultural relics of the “people with colored eyes” they could lay their hands on in every conquered city and town. Monuments inscribed with “Imperial Edicts” of Yuan dynasty rulers were broken and used as foundation stones for the east wall of the city under construction. Gravestones and tomb slabs stolen from the cemeteries of Arabs, Persians, and Italians were laid as bricks in the bases of the newly rising city walls. Since throughout Chinese history the Jews were constantly mistaken for the Muslims, the “Arabs” and “Persians” included the Jews, whose cultural relics met the same fate.

This mass assault did not stop until 1368 when an imperial Ming decree promulgated against "...killing, pillaging, destruction of buildings, or desecration of graves, of the vanquished," By the time the emperor issued this prohibition and ruled that "...talented Mongols and people with colored eyes may be given employment..."(Imperial Ming History. Vol 1) their cultural relics had long since been demolished. This pattern repeated all over China.

Wu Zelin, ethnic historian, ponders the question of how it was that, while Jews the world over have generally managed to survive as cultural and religious entities despite the severest oppression, in China they were so thoroughly absorbed and assimilated that they have vanished almost without a trace.

Philosopher Kant (1790's) postulated that when a body of people holding one faith enters a vast sea of another, its own religion gradually diminishes until it is completely absorbed in the religion of the surrounding host. Yet, Kant believed the Jews were an exception. Although isolated among alien religions all over the globe, they managed to retain their faith intact. He thought this was because they had long possessed relatively complete written scriptures. But the Jews of Kaifeng did not fit in with Kant's explanation. "They had their scriptures, religious teachers, a temple, and were in the midst of people whose religion was very different from their own. Under those circumstances, according to Kant, they should have been able to retain their faith and ethnic characteristics, like Jews in other parts of the world. But exactly the opposite happened: the Jews were entirely assimilated in a very short time.

Every Chinese dynasty has generally advocated a policy of unity with the outside world, and welcomed foreign races and religions, except when subjected to alien political pressures. Foreign races and religions, including Jews, were welcomed. The words of the 1489 Kaifeng inscription show the magnanimity of the Song emperor, "You have come to our Central Plain. Preserve your ancestral customs and settle in Bianliang (Kaifeng),"clearly permitting the Jews to retain their religious faith and preserve their own customs and traditions.

Furthermore, the inscription referring to the erection of the first synagogue in 1163, states the time in terms of the Song dynastic period. By that time Kaifeng was occupied by the Jin Golden Tartars and Song had moved its capital to Hangzhou. To thus stress the sovereignty of the Han Chinese several hundred years after the event demonstrates the friendly relations the Jews enjoyed with their hosts, and the gratitude they still felt for the freedom of religion that enjoyed. This

warmth and generosity on the part of the Chinese enabled the Jews to keep their religious practices, and to preserve their ethnic characteristics. But it also avoided or dissolved any doubts or psychological obstacles that may have existed between the Chinese and the Jews, thereby creating the conditions for a natural absorption.

Jews had equal opportunity to take part in qualifying examinations for official posts. Starting in the 14<sup>th</sup> C increasing numbers of Jewish merchants and intellectuals were appointed to office, a few to quite high positions. They came under the sway of traditional Chinese thought and Confucian teachings. Feudal officialdom and frequent contact with bureaucrats of China's various races gradually changed their philosophic concepts. Ethnic consciousness dimmed, particularly among those Jews who had become powerful and prominent, and this in turn influenced the entire Jewish community. Subsequently the Jews of Kaifeng adopted the feudal Three Duty Relationships and Five Cardinal Virtues, even using the vocabulary of Confucian theory to describe their own spiritual ideals.

The ease of absorption into the host community led to intermarriage. Whenever a race migrates the men always outnumber the women, says We. They are eager to marry local women when they arrive in an alien land. In old China with its rigid feudal social structure, much attention was paid to matching those of similar status.

By the 14<sup>th</sup> C marriage and funeral rites replicated those of Hans. And by mid 19<sup>th</sup> C, Jews were identical in physical appearance and dress with the local Han and Muslim populations. By the 17<sup>th</sup> C strictures had already been broken against marrying persons of other races, and Jews took brides among Hans and Huis (Muslims). Zhang Mei (17<sup>th</sup> C) had 6 wives, some of whom were not Jewish. In the genealogical records of the 7 clans during the Qing Dynasty we find Jews marrying girls of 36 different non-Jewish surnames. All descendents of blue-hatted Hui Hui from Western Regions found today among Yangzhou's Islamic population probably stem from Jewish ancestors who were culturally assimilated.

Religious services of the Sineu Plucking Religion ceased by Tong Zhi period (1862-1875), Qing dynasty. Jews ate pork, could no longer chant Hebrew prayers, and infant boys were not circumcised. Religious ceremonies, such as sacrifices to ancestors, and mourning for parents had changed. In physical appearance, speech and way of life they were virtually indistinguishable from the local Chinese proving that intermarriage was not an isolated phenomenon but common practice. Intermarriage not only gradually eliminated religious traces from their family lives, but as these marriages increased they weakened the cohesiveness of Jewish society and culture and eradicated their unique characteristics as a race.

Kaifeng Jews maintained their synagogue for more than 700 years - from 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Da Ding period 1163 of the Jin (Golden Tartars) to the 30<sup>th</sup> year of the Don Guang period of the Qing Dynasty, (1850). They never suffered oppression. Why did they intermingle with Han and Hio Chinese?

Wu sees assimilation of Chinese Jews as primarily the result of economics. As middle class merchants, doctors, and artisans living amidst a vast native population they could not possibly maintain their original styles of economic existence. Although they had to compete with the Chinese, they were also reliant upon them. Inevitably, they came to emulate them – in methods of production, in culture, in speech, and even adopted Han Chinese names. Wu says, “Neither individuals nor groups exist in isolation. They are mutually used and influenced by other groups and individuals. Although one side may exercise the initiative, to a very large extent it is reacting to the behavior of others. In the metamorphosis of the Kaifeng Jews, they themselves did indeed play the leading role. But the religion, culture and social system of the peoples around them gave powerful impetus.”

In Early Qing (17<sup>th</sup> C) the widely known Shi Ziyu’s Silk Emporium was already growing weak financially because of the erosion of the Jewish community. By 1860’s, as a result of natural and manmade disasters, Kaifeng Jews fell into extreme poverty, Wang Yisha says. They were not even able to maintain their “Purity and Truth Synagogue”. After more floods during the Dao Guang period (1875-1908), the Zhao clan scattered and disappeared. The once wealthy Jin and Shi clans ruined themselves with extravagance and dissipation. Many left Kaifeng for other parts of the country. Some clans like the affluent Gaos either starved to death or scattered in all directions.

As of 1980 there were still 140 former Jewish Kaifeng families in China with 6 surnames. Of these 79 (about 166 people) families lived in Kaifeng, and 61 families had moved to other parts the country.

The Kaifeng Jews mostly live in the Scripture Teaching Religion Southern Lane engaged in occupations ranging through handicraft and mercantile shops - the WAN FU Silver Shop on Gu Lou Street, the Ji Feng Silver Shop on the same treet, Money Exchange Shop, Preserved Fruits shop, restaurants and twine shop...4 goods and sundries shops, 5 odds and ends dealers, 2 independent handicrafts men (one silversmith and one cotton fluffer), 7 workers (3 house painters, 1 carpenter, 1 stevedore, 2 mailmen), 4 teachers, (2 private school teachers, 1 family tutor, 1 missionary school teacher-female), 1 salt maker and coal dust seller, 1 vegetable peddler, I bookkeeper in a foreign goods shop, 1 Buddhist monk, 1 unemployed.

A large percentage of young people and adults of Jewish descent in Kaifeng take part in political activities, reflecting the large extent to which they have been integrated into Chinese society. These include Communists, (women and girls as well), Youth Leaguers; Democratic League, People's congresses.

Ruins and relics include the site of the "Purity and Truth Synagogue", built in 1163 – Da Ding Period of the Jin (Golden Tartar) Dynasty, rebuilt in 1279, Yuan/Mongol dynasty, and renamed the "Ancient Temple Synagogue of Purity and Truth". The compound was 40 by 350 feet long, and includes former dwellings, common burial ground and family cemeteries, Ming and Qing dynasty stone commemorative tablets of the Sinew Plucking Religion, family portraits, books, pictures and genealogies.

In 1912, the Canadian Church of England, bought 3 tablets and moved them into the Church compound of Kaifeng Cathedral. And in 1914 the Church bought the synagogue land and turned it into playground for YMCA. Kafeng municipal government confiscated the land in 1954 and erected a free medical clinic.

The 1663 tablet vanished, says Wang. In 1912 Bishop White moved the 1489/1512 and 1679 tablets to the Cathedral, intending to ship them to Canada. Protest of the people of Kaifeng prevented him from doing so. Other things such as stone carved lotus bowls and jade chimes were sent to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada.

## APPENDIX 11

### HISTORICAL AFFILIATIONS BETWEEN

### ANCIENT ISRAEL, INDIA & TIBET

*Compiled from “The First Book of Contacts Between Jewish And Indio-Tibetan Civilizations Through The Ages: Some Explorations”, Nathan Katz: The Tibet Journal, A Publication for the Study of Tibet, Winter, 1991 Vol. XVI, #4, Nathan Katz Guest Editor*

The First Book of Kings and Second Chronicles, (10<sup>th</sup> C BCE Court of King Solomon) describes opulence that the Bible suggests was derived from trade with India. I Kings 10:20 describes the ship of Tarshish that came every 3 years ‘bringing gold and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks. So King Shelomo exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom.’”

Hebrew words of obvious Indian origin, ivory, (literal translation of Sanskrit *ibha-danda*, “elephant’s tooth”; *qpeyim*, apes, from the Tamil *kope*; and *tukiyim*, peacocks, from the Tamil *tuk*. Ofir, mentioned in II Chronicles 8:18 may be the Indian port of Supara, near the mouth of Indus River.

Reference to ancient sea trade in the Baveru Jataka, Buddhist text that refers to ancient trade between India and Babylon, Baveru, in Sanskrit, between 5<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> C BCE.

Kevaddhu Sutta, a Pali text, which according to Buddhist tradition was the language spoken by the Buddha during the 6<sup>th</sup> C BCE and which was redacted during 1<sup>st</sup> C BCE, “we read how long ago merchants sailed far out of sight from the coast, taking “shore-sighting birds”, which were released from time to time in order that they might guide the mariners to land. Not only is the verse reminiscent of the Biblical Noah story, (Gen 6:9 – 11:32), but these Buddhist texts tend to indicate a much earlier use of the Indian Ocean sea lanes than is commonly believed to have been the case.

Buddha and King Solomon share legends. In the *Maoshadha Jataka*, a yaksini (demoness) stole a baby from its mother, intending to eat it. The mother confronted the Yaksini but was rebuked by the demoness who claimed the baby as her own. Arguing that they happened to pass the judgment hall of the Maharaja of Kasi (Benares) who was none other than the Buddha in a previous birth.

“He (the Maharaja) heard the noise, sent for them, inquired into the matter, and asked them whether they would abide by his decision. And they agreed. Then he had a line drawn on the ground; and told the yakshini to take hold of the child’s arms, and the mother to take hold of its legs and said, “The child shall be hers who drags him over the line. But as soon as they pulled at him, the mother, seeing how he suffered, grieved as if her heart would break. And letting him go, she stood there weeping... Then he said, “Whom do you think is the mother? She who has the child in her arms, or she who has let go?” And they answered, “She who has let go is the mother.”

In Kings 3:16-28 two harlots come to King Solomon. Both had babies. One smothered hers by lying on it, and says the other’s baby is hers. King Solomon suggests slicing the baby in half. “Then spoke the woman whose child was the living one to the king, for her love was enkindled towards her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, but do not slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it. The king answered and said, Give her the living child, and do not slay it; she is the mother....”

Both the Solomon literature (10<sup>th</sup> C BCE), and Buddhist *Jataka* birth-story, believed to have been spoken by the Buddha himself in the 6<sup>th</sup> C BCE, were not written down until the 1<sup>st</sup> C BCE. Therefore it is impossible to really know who was borrowing whose story, but “the entire *Jataka* literature was made known to the western world by Jewish merchants of the early middle ages. Symeon Seth, about 1080 AD inscribed a first translation into a European language, modern Greek.” Another version was translated into Hebrew and another into Latin (by John of Capua, 1263 and 1278. At about the same time as the Hebrew version, another was made directly from the Arabic into Spanish and a fifth version into Latin. From these five versions translations were afterwards made into German, Italian, French and English. The title of the second Latin version was *Aesop the Old!* This reveals not only the sustained cultural dialogue between India and the west, but also the pivotal Jewish role within this intellectual community, Late in the 20<sup>th</sup> C Aesop’s fables were translated from English into Sanskrit, a return to their original cultural and linguistic home.

References to ancient linkages between India and Israel exist in Jewish historical writings, such as the *Talmud* (1-6 CE), the authoritative rabbinic compositions. Josephus was the preeminent Jewish historical writer of the 1C Hellenic period. His account of martyrdom at Masada (late Second Temple period) in the voice of Eleazar, who argues that mass martyrdom was preferable to capture, is most convincing when he compares the Jews and the Indians.

“Let us regard those Indians who profess the exercise of philosophy, for these good men do but unwillingly undergo the time of life, and look upon it as a necessary servitude, and make haste to let their souls loose from their bodies; nay when no misfortune presses them to do it, nor drives them upon it, these have such a desire for a life of immortality that they tell other men beforehand that they are about to depart; and nobody hinders them, but every one thinks them happy men, and gives them letters to be carried to their familiar friends (that are dead), so firmly and certainly do they believe that souls converse with one another (in the other world). So when these men have heard all such commands that were to be given them, they deliver their body to the fire: and in order to their getting souls a separation from the body in the greatest purity, they die in the midst of hymns of commendations made to them; for their dearest friends conduct them to their death more readily than do any of the rest of mankind conduct their fellow-citizens when they are going on a very long journey, who at the same time weep on their own account but look upon others as happy persons, as so soon to be made partakers of the immortal order of beings. Are not we, therefore, ashamed to have lower notions than the Indians? And by our cowardice to lay a base reproach upon the laws of our country, which are so much desired and imitated by all mankind.”

Katz suggests that Josephus modeled his histories after the Greek histories, especially Thucydides. The Greeks held India in the highest regard as the home of the greatest philosophers. In both Greek and Indian literature, exciting philosophic dialogues occur often, especially in the age of Alexander of Macedon’s invasion of India during the 4<sup>th</sup> C BCE, eg in the Buddhist text, the *Milindapanha*, in which a Greco-Bactrian king posed questions to the Buddhist monk, Naasena. One could argue that in citing India as the paradigm of philosophic courage, Josephus was reflecting a Hellenized world-view. Yet, there had been sustained commerce between India and ancient Israel for so long, (despite an interruption caused by the breakdown of the Persian Empire during the 4<sup>th</sup> C BCE) that it is clear that Jews during the late Second Temple period were aware of Indian spirituality and regarded it highly.

The *Talmud* (1-6<sup>th</sup> C CE) contains references to India. eg to the ancient pepper trade. Solomon used ruhot (winds) to get ships to India for peppers; in Pirquei Qvot, the term pilpul, is used for sharpening of the wits through vociferous debate, a characteristic of traditional Jewish education to this day. Intriguingly, among all the world’s religious traditions, only Judaism and Tibetan Buddhism have developed debate as a religious practice. The Hebrew word for pepper, pilpel, comes from the Sanskrit, pippali. Pepper was the most prized product of India in

the Greek and Roman Empires. The alternative word for pippali is yavana-priya, “beloved of the Greeks/Romans,” and it is said the Roman Empire bankrupted itself due to its love for pepper imported from India, which quite literally was worth its weight in gold. Certainly during medieval times, and quite likely from ancient times as well, much of the pepper trade between the Malabar Coast of India and west was in the hands of Jewish traders of Cranganore and later Cochin.

The early 10<sup>th</sup> C, great rationalist interpreter of *Torah*, Saadia ben Joseph (882-942) known as Saadia Gaon, referenced the Jewish India trade, “...one will find that the ignorant people of our town (Sure in Babylonia) are of the opinion that everyone who goes to India becomes rich.” 11<sup>th</sup> C French commentator Rabbi Shelomo bar Isaac (1040-1105), better known by the acrostic Rashi, mentioned Rabbi Judah from India, whom Rashi considered a convert.

Jews have lived in India since early in the Common Era, and perhaps earlier. Indian Christians tell that their founder, Apostle Thomas, came to India in the year 52 CE because he wanted to tell his fellow Jews about his purported messiah. In 70 CE, a small colony near Cochine, on Malabar Coast, was established. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> C Jews from Amsterdam wrote a letter to Yechezkel Rahabi, leader of Cochin Jewry, questioning whether he knew of Jewish communities in China and Tibet. Rahabi knew of the former, but as to latter, “Regarding your query whether there are Jews in Tibet, I beg to inform your Eminence that this place is unknown to us...”

Some time later Jews who may have been fleeing persecution in Persia were shipwrecked near Bombay, and became known as “Bnei Israel”, India’s largest Jewish community. Bene Israel today stretches as far as Delhi and interacts well with the capital’s Tibetan community. Later Persian-speaking Jews became courtiers of the Mughal emperors at Agra and Delhi. Mystic, Sarmad, Kabbalist and poet, became tutor to the heir of throne Dara Shukoh, but he and the prince were executed when Aurangzeb seized power in coup. Assumed Muslim, his shrine is beside main entrance to Delhi’s Jama Masjid.

Jews were the trading links between Christian Europe and Hindu-Buddhist India. 8<sup>th</sup> C Muslim Caliph, Es-Saffah, sent a Jew to India to learn mathematics. In the west our numerical notation system and the basis for arithmetic, is misnamed as “Arabic numerals” when, in fact, they were brought by Jews from India via the Middle East to Europe. The misnomer came from a mistakenly perceived Middle Eastern source. The ancient spice trade followed land and sea routes between the Middle East and south India. Famous silk routes, which may date from as early as

2<sup>nd</sup> C, linked Europe with China. Muslim traveler's diaries from 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> C testify to the prominence of Jews in both these trades.

Medieval Jews plied land and sea routes bringing tin to India for repair and returned west with spices and linen. In ships from Spain to China, ports of Bombay, Cochin, and Ceylon, they were the only group that could pass with impunity through the otherwise impenetrable barrier that separated Christianity from Islam.

Despite reports of Christian missionaries proclaiming the discovery of a Jewish community in Tibet as early 1833, as well as Jews on Tibet's borders, there is no hard evidence Jewish settlements in Tibet. Part of the problem is that Indic languages do not distinguish among "western peoples". There is still no word for Jew in Tibetan. However, there is evidence of Jewish settlements virtually encircling Tibet with Jewish settlements in India, Kashmir, Turkestan, and China. Jews also reached the north at Silk Route Oases and became prominent in the Courts of the Mongols. As early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> C CE, Stein reported a Judeo-Persian document from the very early 8<sup>th</sup> C found by DS Margoliouth at Dandan-Uiliq, near Dunhuang, Turkestan, and in the Cave of a Thousand Buddhas at Duanhuang. Pelliot found a Hebrew prayer written on paper that the experts also date as 8<sup>th</sup> C. As only China had paper at the time, it must have been written by Jews within China's borders, since it could not have come from the outside. These two artifacts prove that Jews were in Xinjiang, as well as a number of other cities, particularly Dunhuang, along the Silk Route between Asia and Europe

Khotan, Tibetan provincial center at the time, housed a Jewish community from at least the 8<sup>th</sup> C. It was such an important trading center that most medieval geographers thought it was Tibet's capital. A Muslim travel guide of the 10<sup>th</sup> C mentioned Jews living in that multi-religious city: "In 941 a Muslim traveler, Abu Dulaf, came to a tribe in Tubat (probably Tibet, or more specifically the oasis of Hotan (Khotan) which had belonged to Tibet) where he found a large city built of cane, and inhabited also by Muslims, Jews, Christians, Maginas, and Hindus. He also found Jews in neighboring Bahi (Bai or Pima?)"

Arabic-speaking Jews from Iraq came to Indian port cities to seek fortunes in trade during British times, and at least one of their families traded directly with Tibet through Kalimpong. The felt hats so treasured by the Tibetans were imported from Italy by the Sopher family of Bombay. Hyeem Hyeem, a Kabbalist, ritual slaughterer and prolific author, hailed from Yemen and, lived in Darjeeling. Asher

Hallevy, another Jewish mystic of Darjeeling (1849-1912), was Austrian by birth and cobbler by trade.

A mysterious group of tribals from the far northeast of India recently have claimed Jewish ancestry. In their legends they went from ancient Israel to China, and passed through Tibet en route to Mizoram, Burma and Tripura, where several thousand have recently undergone Orthodox conversions in Judaism.

Many Kashmiris to this day claim to be descendants of Israel. The great Muslim geographer, al-Beruni, commented on the Jewish presence there, "It is very difficult to have any commerce with (the Kashmiris). In former times they used to allow one or two foreigners to enter their country, particularly Jews, but at present they do not allow any Hindu whom they do not know personally, to enter much less other people."

Al-Beruni noted a theological similarity between Judaism, and Hinduism, an emphasis on God's transcendent ineffability: "The Hindus begin their books with OM, the word creation...The figure of the word OM is does not consist of any letters; it is simply an image invented to represent this word, which people use, believing that it will bring them a blessing, and meaning thereby a confession of the unity of God. Similar to this is the manner in which Jews write the name of God, by three Hebrew yods. In the Torah the word is written YHVH and pronounced Adonai: sometimes they also say YAH. The word Adonai, wich they pronounce is not expressed in writing."

Some Jews attained high position in the Mongol court. A Jew from Shanxi Province named Zhou Zhou (Zhou for Jew derived from Persian) became a close advisor to Genghis Khan during 13<sup>th</sup> C. We know about Zhou only because of the virtue of his wife, Cui. In The New (Dynastic) History, 19<sup>th</sup> C work, Cui, a Jewess, is lauded "as the perfect Confucian woman". At the death of her husband, Cui gave away all her possessions, supported herself by spinning and weaving, and was known to be so graciously pious that later Confucian historians claimed her for one of their own.

Pan Guandan, argues for Jewish presence in Guangchou, (Canton), Ganpu and Hangzhou during late Tang dunasty, or 9<sup>th</sup> C, as well as medieval communities in Ningbo, Beijing, Quanzhou, Ningxia, Yuangzhou, Nanjing, as well as the famous community of Kaifeng during medieval times.

Katz concludes: “All of these historical fragments hint at ongoing Jewish-Tibetan contacts, preceded by millennia of varied Jewish-Indian and Jewish-Buddhist connections. Even more difficult to establish than contacts between Jews and Tibetans are the mutual influences between Judaism and Tibetan Buddhism. There is a similarity between legends about King Solomon and the Buddha....another link as well, between Jewish Messianism and the Tibetan Kalacakra system. In this case there does not appear to have been any direct influence; indeed both Jewish messianism and the Kalacakra seem to stem from a common source in ancient Persian religion, probably Zoroastrian. What we can learn from this mediated interaction between Judaism and Tibetan Buddhism is that a religious spirit may reverberate differently in differing cultures, but the original religious impetus for these developments may remain identifiable. Rather than looking for a mechanistic, one-to-one borrowing, scholars must address a more fluid model for interactions among religions. The history of the religious impetus which expressed itself in both Kalacakra Tantra and in Jewish Messianism should be analyzed from the perspective of a more interactive model or inter-religious interaction.”

Tibetans have identified their painful experience of exile with Jewish history. And Jewish delegates to the inter-faith dialogue organized by the Dalai Lama in 1990, empathized and identified with the Tibetans’ struggle based on their own history, “we felt it in our bones”. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, representing the Reform sect of Judaism, was the first religious body to offer congratulations when the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. The American Jewish World Service, a development organization, has worked closely with the Hunsur settlement in South India, and plans to expand efforts in this direction.

Western scholars of Tibetan Buddhism include a disproportionate number of Jews.