

RABBI TOKAYER

For more than 35 years, Rabbi Marvin Tokayer of Great Neck led thousands of tourists on what were called *Journeys through Jewish eyes* and my wife Phyllis and I were fortunate to take three — respectively to India, China and Japan. What follows here are several memorable highlights of our Travels with Tokayer.

In the early 1960s Rabbi Tokayer was assigned to serve for two years as a United States Air Force chaplain in Japan. After he returned home to Long Island, he was able to arrange for an audience with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Rebbe urged him to return to Japan because the small Jewish community there badly needed a religious leader. Tokayer was skeptical but eventually agreed to go for just two years — he stayed for eight as the only rabbi in the country — indeed, in the entire Far East, his territory including India, Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea.

In 1971 Rabbi Tokayer published a book in Japanese entitled *5,000 Years of Jewish Wisdom: Secrets of The Talmud* that was translated into Japanese and sold over a million copies; it was later translated into Chinese and Korean and sold millions more copies. The rabbi extensively researched the history of the Jews in China and Japan, including the role that the Japanese played in helping victims of the Holocaust. In his book *The Fugu Plan*, published in 1979, Tokayer described how two Japanese officials helped thousands of Jews in Lithuania escape to Japan before World War II.

The Paradesi synagogue in **Cochin**, India was founded in 1568 and is located on Jew Street. Our group of thirty American tourists far outnumbered the remnant of Indian Jews. (Most of their living family members had made *aliyah* to Israel.) After Shabbat morning service, the tiny congregation treated us to lunch which featured a single *kashered* chicken to feed the multitude. Our host told me that he'd been present in 1968 when Indira Ghandi, the prime minister of India, attended and spoke at the synagogue's 400th anniversary celebration. She began her greeting by saying "Shalom" and at a reception held later, he was introduced to her and asked, "Madame Prime Minister. Where did you learn that word?" She calmly replied, "*Fiddler on the Roof* of course."

The next year we took Rabbi Tokayer's "China Through Jewish Eyes" trip which featured a three day cruise down the Yangtze River to view the soon to be completed Three Gorges Dam. Kosher style travel can be daunting but this boat trip was catered by a synagogue in Hong Kong, so as we cruised down the river, we feasted on chopped liver, pot roast and various kosher delicacies. One day we were served a local favorite —turtle soup. It had suspicious looking things floating in the tureen — thankfully, these were "mock turtles" made of giant mushrooms. During our trip down river, I developed an upper respiratory infection and figured that this would be a good opportunity to sample Chinese medicine — I was hoping that the boat's doctor might prescribe acupuncture. We communicated by sign language, then he used a stethoscope to listen to my chest (through my shirt) and, having confirmed the diagnosis, the doctor opened a cabinet and handed me a vial of tetracycline pills. Darn.

In the summer of 2001 Phyllis and I celebrated our 40th anniversary in Japan. In **Kyoto**, our group visited a large Protestant church called *Beit Shalom* (House of Peace.) We learned that it was the mother church of a sect called Christian Friends of Israel who recognize Jews as the Chosen People. They have about 10,000 members who believe that fostering good relations between Christians and Jews will hasten the return of the Messiah. They pray three times a day for the safety of Jews and of Jerusalem, "the center of the world where God lives." As we exited the bus and removed our shoes, we saw a statue of Ann Frank outside the entrance to the church while on the podium inside there were flags of Israel and Japan, a large golden menorah and an embroidered *Sh'ma Israel*. There also were Hebrew inscriptions on the walls and a chandelier with twelve lights representing the twelve tribes.

The huge auditorium was filled with hundreds of people who as we entered stood and sang *Haveinu Shalom Alechem* — many of them had tears in their eyes and so did we. A choir of about thirty young people, all with radiant faces and dressed in colorful kimonos, gave a splendid concert of Israeli and Hebrew music - all sung by heart and with heart. This was followed by messages of greeting by church elders one of whom explained that they neither want to convert Jews to Christianity nor themselves convert to Judaism. They do not observe Jewish holidays or practice Jewish rituals but are interested in Jewish culture. Their leader Father Otsuki explained that what he wants for Jews is for them to be better Jews.

After the concert ended, we mingled with the choir participants and members of Beit Shalom and explored the church which was filled with Israeli art and Judaica, and as we filed out after dinner, many of our hosts had tears in their eyes as if our presence

honored them. The church maintain guest houses, named for Anne Frank, where they provide three days free lodging for any visiting Jew. In 1970 Rabbi Tokayer participated in dedicating the first such sanctuary, nailing a mezuzah on the door and instructing members about what kosher foods to use to stock the refrigerators.

Later Rabbi Tokayer explained that there's another pro-Israel Christian group in Japan called Makuya (Tabernacle) which has some 60,000 members! They believe that they originated from the twelve tribes and cite the results of genetic testing as proof. They observe Chanukah, Pesach and Easter and have a Bar Mitzvah rite for 13 year olds. Although their founder toyed with the idea of circumcision, this was not accepted by his followers. Many of their members have visited Israel and have demonstrated in front of the United Nations in support of Israel.

Marvin Tokayer is a marvelous raconteur and my favorite of his many stories dated back to the time when he was based in Tokyo. Each month he would take a bullet-train to the port city of **Kobe** to meet with a small enclave of Jewish businessman who had married Japanese women. The group would lunch at a local restaurant that also was frequented by Kobe's municipal and business leaders. Among the locals whom Tokayer came to know was the chief of police who one day approached him and said, "Rabbi, I need your help. We have one of your people and don't know what to do with him." Rabbi Tokayer drove with the police chief to the local jail where he found sitting on a stool in a cell a forlorn looking young man in full *hasidic* regalia! The young man could only speak Yiddish, but Tokayer was able to piece together his story.

It seems that his family was in the jewelry business in New York City and he had been sent to Japan to buy pearls. He brought with him two suitcases — one with his clothing and the other with cans of kosher food to sustain him. But what to eat them *on*? He bought some dishes but, according to Jewish custom, first they had to be purified in running water. Not only is Kobe a coastal city, it also was a navy base and when the intrepid (and oblivious) *hasid*, marched down to the water's edge, opened his suitcase, bent over and began doing something suspicious looking, the Navy guards observing this bizarre scene must have been amazed. Who was this alien creature and what was he doing? Of course, the *hasid* couldn't have understood the many signs that said "Keep Out" nor could the guards understand his strange language, so they arrested him. Although Rabbi Tokayer understood the scenario, he wondered how to explain it to the police chief, so he took out his English-Japanese pocket dictionary and looked up a single word — RITUAL — and when he pronounced that in Japanese to the chief, the

prisoner was immediately released! Enough said. An example of how much ritual is cherished by the Japanese.

Note: In a ceremony in 2017, the Government of Japan conferred on Rabbi Tokayer the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays “for his outstanding contribution towards the promotion of friendly relations between Japan and the Jewish people and to a deepened understanding of Japan.”