Cover Story
by Erica Lyons

Comic Strip Diplomacy
Sketching Chinese and Israeli history

Yaakov Kirschen photographed by his wife, artist Sali Ariel.
I suppose I should not have been surprised to open my friend’s DIY child-friendly Haggadah and find a prominent Pesach Dry Bones cartoon. Though it did seem almost an extraordinary coincidence, a sign or an act of fate that Dry Bones made its way into this Haggadah in Hong Kong only hours after I touched base with Dry Bones creator, Yaakov Kirschen.

Dry Bones, a political cartoon from the Jerusalem Post, has been a Jewish household favorite since it first appeared in 1973. It has been reprinted or quoted in a myriad of publications including the NY Times, Time Magazine, LA Times, CBS, AP and Forbes. Kirschen’s graphic art has for decades provided an insightful, pictorial commentary on many of the most significant events of the day. Collectively, the Dry Bones collection reads more like an academic treatise than a comic strip offering distinct graphic perspectives and snapshots of time.

And even with all of these accomplishments, including the newly received Israeli Museum of Caricature and Comics’ Golden Pencil award, Kirschen commented, “I find myself totally consumed by a new and challenging cartoon project. And stranger still, it’s connected to China and the Chinese.”

Kirschen’s newest project, Project3500 or The Dry Bones China Project has transformed him from comic strip creator to diplomat. He has found a way to reinvent his work so that it can speak with a cutting edge different medium to an entirely new set of people, from a new generation who speak in Chinese and data bites. Kirschen understands the potential of Dry Bones to reach Chinese audiences and connect today’s generation with the past and two ancient peoples with one another. Specifically designed for today’s global and technologically savvy generation, the user will be taken on ‘trips’ through 3,500 years of Israeli/Jewish history while simultaneously journeying through the history of China during that same time period.

For nearly 40 years the Dry Bones cartoon has appeared in The Jerusalem Post and continues to engender a high level of enthusiasm among loyal readers. To reach this new generation, Kirschen understands the format must change lest they become impervious to the information and as a result his Project3500 is therefore designed for iPod, iPad, smartphone, tablet users in China. “I’m hoping to reach our 21st century globalized generations. Events in the 20th century crippled the natural continuity and growth of both Chinese and Jewish civilizations due to epically, tumultuous historic events. While the next generation, generally speaking, has been characterized as seemingly dispassionate about the past, there is a way to reach them. Instead of categorically dismissing the internet and technological globalization as a threat to ancient ways of life and our past, Kirschen has embraced this as a powerful tool to reach a large and broad audience in a language they understand. Furthermore, according to Kirschen, “the opportunity offered to both Jewish and Chinese civilizations opened up by globalization seems to be identical.”

This connection between the Jews and the Chinese is a motif that runs through many contemporary works connecting these
two civilizations as both trace their history back to ancient times, their modern states were born around the same time with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in Beijing on 1 October 1949 and the declaration of Israeli independence on 14 May 1948. The two civilizations’ histories juxtaposed against one another provide context and broaden the users’ understanding. Furthermore, Kirschen explains, “The danger to both Jewish and Chinese civilization posed by globalization and a cut-off from the past seems to be identical.” Kirschen plans to build on what he sees as a natural affinity between the two the groups and fondly refers to the groups as “sister civilizations.” He see both Israel and China as partners in an effort to counter their “demonization by the West.”

Likewise, the cartoon or comic strip genre is naturally quite suited to Asian audiences as evidenced by the overwhelming popularity of the Manga and graphic novel formats. It is a region with an overall proclivity towards this genre.

As to how Kirschen personally developed this China connection, a bit tongue and cheek, he explains, “I grew up
and went to school in New York City. If the best student in the class was not Jewish, he/she was Chinese. As NY Jews we were at home with chopsticks in the local Chinese restaurant. One of my closest friends in college was a guy named Calvin Wong who lived down the street from me. At his home I discovered that his mom was as controlling as mine. So in a city with people from all over the planet, I came to think of Chinese as the people most like my people.”

And while jokes about Jews affinity for Chinese food and images of matzah balls with chopsticks are funny to us as Jews, how will Dry Bones humor translate into Chinese? For starters, Kirschen, worked with Guan He, as a translator, a cultural consultant, and a social media advisor. Guan has collected a couple of masters degrees and has studied at institutions that include Fudan University, Shanghai, London School of Economics and Political Science, and is currently studying at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “It is because of her that the material ‘feels’ Chinese, rather than as a translation,” says Kirschen.

As for whether humor translates (save often for the humor in the translations themselves) according to Kirschen, it actually doesn’t but Project3500 isn’t based on humor but rather “Dry Bones adventure and analysis.” For anyone that has ever tried to translate a joke, they understand that it is a daunting task, but images are powerful tools for conveying emotion and meaning, they are something universal and require no translation. Likewise, this actually isn’t a mere translation of Israel’s/ the Jewish people’s story, Kriskins has written it as a rather serious exploration of the history and lessons of our ancient civilization, from the point of view of Chinese civilization. To Kirschen, the 21st century’s apathy for their people’s history is no laughing matter.

And while transmitting history and infusing lessons from our past are certainly important, for a generation that Kirschen sees as cut off from their association with their own past and rather disengaged, how can a comic make an impact? As someone who takes this business very seriously, Kirsch en explains, “Images are the most powerful communications tools we have. That’s why you cover your eyes at a scary part of a horror movie. Cartoons are the most concentrated images that we have, so yes, cartoons can make a big difference.” And tackling serious subjects in a comic format is not new; take Art Spiegelman’s Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, the biography of the author’s father, for example. The age-old adage that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ is not misstated. Kirschen has long ago clearly mastered the power of images to reach people and comment on serious events.

Project3500 is also a step to further developing the relationship between China and Israel by giving the next generation a context for better understanding these two civilizations.

As Kirschen explains, “my work at Yale [as Artist in Residence at YIISA, Yale’s Interdisciplinary Initiative for the Study of Anti-Semitism], investigating anti-Semitism in political cartoons brought me face to face with the fact that the Chinese were non-Jews who had not been infected with the behavioral virus that we call anti-Semitism.” Unlike European nations, they haven’t been tainted by anti-Semitism. In China, Kirschen cites the absence of preconceived prejudices against the Jewish/Israeli story and an openness to further exploration and a general curiosity to understand this “Startup Nation”. To Kirschen, China’s next generation are ripe for this introduction to the history of Israel and Jewish people and his project affords a layer of protections against one of the great dangers Israel/Jews face, the rampant “willful rewriting of history”. Each Project3500 trip is a new educational opportunity and a way to reach this new audience.

“There is an obvious and natural economic fit between our two nations ... but as bearers of ancient wisdoms our two nations, Israel and China, have a responsibility to do more. To bring civilization and stability to a chaotic world. My message, the message of Project3500, is about the importance of our civilization..and, if I do it right,” continues Kirschen, “the works should be exciting, fun, and a turn-on for a new generation.”