



# Uncovering the Mysteries of Kaifeng

Shi Lei with Rabbi Bloom

**F**or many people, including most Jews, even lesser known than the Jewish refugee story in Shanghai during World War II, is the story of the Jews of Kaifeng, China. While both stories have been somewhat recently 'rediscovered', the Kaifeng story still carries a certain air of mystery to it. Today, there are not a lot of Western travelers in Kaifeng, as, by Chinese standards, it is a relatively "small" city of 800,000 people (with a metropolitan area of 4 million), but at one time, it was the largest city in the world. This height of Kaifeng's glory was during the time of the Song Dynasty, which lasted from the late 10th Century to the late 13th Century.

For my family this was just one stop on a journey, during my sabbatical, that has taken us to Fiji, Australia, China, Dubai and then ultimately onto Israel for four months.

We enjoyed our time in Kaifeng even beyond the Jewish part of the tour, because it felt somehow more authentically "Chinese" to us after

Shanghai, since the residents there have very little contact with Westerners. We were introduced to this community by Shi Lei, who is a descendant of these Jews and who spoke in Oakland, California just before we left for sabbatical. He also served as our tour guide in Kaifeng, and it was like drinking water directly from the spring instead of from bottles. (Of course, in China, as in many parts of the region, you can only drink water from bottles, but that's another story entirely.)

The Kaifeng Jewish community is truly shrouded in mystery today, but most scholars believe that Jews first settled there during the Song dynasty from Persia. There they were welcomed by the Emperor and were called, literally, the "people who remove the sinew from the cow." This appellation is based on the idea that those who keep Kosher do not eat any part of the animal that touches the sciatic nerve, derived from the scene in the Torah where Jacob wrestles with the angel.

The Jewish community remained

intact for centuries, though they often intermarried with the local population so that they eventually became physically indistinguishable from other Chinese. For centuries, they maintained their traditions, more or less. We learned that in the end though they all almost completely assimilated. Then, of course, there was the Cultural Revolution of the fifties and sixties under Mao Tse-Tung. As a result, there are only about 50 members of the community that can even trace their roots back.

In Kaifeng there is now a three room exhibit in the very large Millenium City Park detailing the history of the community and telling their story through painting, writing, and photos. There is a wonderful model of the old synagogue and its courtyard, which looks just like any other Chinese holy place and courtyard rather than like a European synagogue.

Shi Lei also took us to his own family museum, which is also where the community gathers on some Shabbatot. There he has more photos as well

# Travel Diary

by Mark S. Bloom

as ritual objects. Unfortunately, the roof recently caved in, so they are not meeting anywhere, and thus he was unable to gather them for me to meet with them or do any teaching. He also showed us the site of the former mikveh, which, believe it or not, now is the boiler room of a local hospital. It is locked, so we were unable to peek in. Shi Lei has seen it, and the people in town refer to it as the “old Jewish well.” The hospital is also the site of the former synagogue, so just outside, we sang “Ma Tovv, how goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel,” to remind us that we were standing on formerly sacred space.

He also took us to what they call “Teach Torah Lane,” where the Jewish community used to live. It is now a rather poor part of town, where we saw two very sad sites: a cock trained for fighting was walking around and a pile of animal excrement. This lane has long been forgotten. How far it is from the Torah that used to be taught there.

We all connected with the story of these Jews. One really memorable part of the Kaifeng trip involved my son Jonah.

On the Shanghai Jewish tour, the tour guide had him go to a little toy shop and told him he could pick out any toy in the store. He picked a basketball, and if you know Jonah, that is not a surprise. Because we don’t have the space to carry around a basketball for 5 months, he decided he wanted to give it to a boy in Kaifeng about his own age. He wanted to give it to someone in the Jewish community, but since we couldn’t meet any, he decided to give it to the first boy he saw at “Teach Torah Lane.” It was a very sweet moment.

It was an emotional parting from Shi Lei, who was such an amazing host. Before my trip I was contacted by an individual who had lived in Kaifeng for a year and taught Judaism to some of the members of the community. This person hopes to get rabbis interested in converting the community formally. Shi Lei’s take, along with other teachers, is that this sadly has divided the community rather than uniting it. It is hard to know who or what to believe. The situation is further complicated because there are definite cultural differences that are hard for us in the West to understand. Many of us would

welcome the descendants of the Kaifeng Jewish community to the fold without hesitation, but they may not be willing to go there in the way that the rest of the Jewish world would require in order for them to gain acceptance. Regardless, controversy aside, it was a special moment and a meaningful journey that we will remember forever. ✡

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Previously, Rabbi Bloom served pulpits in Cranston, Rhode Island, South Salem, New York and Sydney, Australia. He was ordained at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1995 and received both Bachelors and Masters Degrees in Communication Studies from Northwestern University. He is the author of *Out of the Mouths of Babes: What Children Can Teach Us About Spirituality, Jewish Issues and the Jewish People*.

