

CLIMBING HIGHER

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The escalator moved steadily up the mountain. I had seen escalators in department stores and public buildings all my life, but never one going up the side of a mountain. It seemed like thousands of people had gotten on down below, people returning from work, battling the soggy effects of a lingering monsoon and the steamy heat of the middle of summer. The day was coming to an end, slowly as it does in a big city, and people were going home.

“The sun was departing from the tops of the trees,” Bialik wrote, and here in Hong Kong it was soon to depart from the buildings and from behind the mountains. The Sabbath Queen was soon to come.

We had come to Hong Kong en route to Singapore, and this was our first Shabbat in the Far East. Is His kingdom recognized even here, I wondered? Has His People spread so far and would there really be a synagogue here at China’s doorstep?

The escalator rides up Victoria Peak beginning close to the harbor. The South China Sea forms a great bay here creating the harbor that begs for rich trade. Mountains surround it like those in Chinese scroll paintings, but down by the water is not the best place to live. When the British came to Hong Kong, they built their homes up on the mountain. Though transportation was difficult, it was cooler at the heights and, especially before air-conditioning, the coolness of the outside air determined where people would live.

So the Jews came to live at what is called “Midlevels,” halfway up the mountain. The Sassoon family arrived in Hong Kong when it was ceded to Great Britain by China in 1842. They transferred their offices from neighboring Canton and helped develop this new port. They and the Kadoorie brothers, leaders in the foundation of the Jewish community, were Baghdadi Jews.

The Hong Kong Jewish Community was officially established in 1857 and the Ohel Leah synagogue, built by Sir Jacob Sassoon and named for his mother, opened in 1902. It was for Ohel Leah that we searched in this escalator ride up. The mountain- climbing escalator turned out to be many pieces of escalator all stitched together. You spend five minutes on one and then you walk to the next. To the right and to the left pulses the energy of a great city, its neighborhoods and its businesses, the smells of its markets and its restaurants. And, never having taken this trip before, I couldn’t be sure that we would ever end up where we wanted to be.

The whole world is full of His glory—there must be a synagogue.

Rain fell, the humidity continued to grow and I began to appreciate the importance of the escalator that climbs up the hill. Since it was stationary and continuously operating, it was a perfect Shabbat conveyance, helping Jews from far away find their compatriots and enabling the travelers to have a place in the minyan that welcomes the Sabbath Day.

I had checked out the escalator before going, wondering otherwise how we would make it up the steep mountain on Shabbat. As hard as it was now, in the minutes before the sun was soon to set, how much worse it would be to have to climb to Midlevels in the morning with its stifling humidity and heat.

By the time we came to Robinson Road I thought we had climbed most of Everest, and now we were in search of the synagogue itself. The monsoon rains began to fall more strongly and we looked frantically for a building that looked Jewish. After a few moments of despair we came upon the beautiful early twentieth century building, sitting below street level, as if on a cliff, and guarded by gates and personnel. Walking in, one of us searched for the women's section, the other for a bench among the men; Kabbalat Shabbat had just begun.

The service was Sephardi, the prayerbook the Israeli Rinat Yisrael according to the Sephardi rite. The synagogue was built from beautiful dark woods, reminiscent of fine Chinese furniture. Artistic designs and Biblical verses were painted throughout the interior, giving the room an elegant and happy feel. The benches were, as in most Sephardi congregations, parallel to the long walls, with a dark wood bimah in the center. The service was, though slightly different from our own, familiar as ever. The Jews welcomed the Sabbath, a homecoming to some of us also from the long ride and the exotic place.

The synagogue in Hong Kong is part of a complex of buildings which includes an adjacent Jewish Community Center. In the Center there are several Kosher restaurants, one functioning on Shabbat by prior reservation. Most of the daveners were on their way home after services but we, the travelers, congregated in the lovely room where we would eat. We were Jews from many places: another couple was on route, as we were, to the meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Singapore where he and I would speak in the coming days. They had come from Brooklyn and were as amazed as we that this was all happening. We would meet again in Singapore and then in Bangkok, tasting the synagogues in the exotic locales and comparing notes each time.

There was a mohel from London with his wife. Next to me sat an artist from the Island of Reunion, a French-speaking Jew who hailed from the middle of the Indian Ocean. He was preparing to open an exhibit of his paintings in Hong Kong and had come to spend Shabbat with his fellow Jews. There were Jews from Antwerp, on business in Hong Kong and China, who also had come to the Jewish Community for Shabbat. There was an American who is an inventor of medical devices who brings them to China so that they can be made.

We learned that among those people who are involved in the growing trade of China with the West, there are numerous religious Jews. They frequently do business in China during the week, but want to be with a Jewish community on Shabbat and that brings them to Hong Kong, the nearest significant community of Jews. An Israeli, currently serving the Hong Kong Jewish Community as a youth emissary, made Kiddush, and we settled down to a Shabbat feast, to magnificent, elegant food and service at what seemed to me to be one of the four corners of the earth.

My mind drew me back to the middle of the seventeenth century and Menasseh ben Israel's visit to England. The Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 and Ben Israel, a Portuguese Jew brought up in Amsterdam, was drawn to England and to Oliver Cromwell because they both shared the vision that a messianic age might soon dawn if the Jews were

scattered to the true far corners of the earth. England was, to Menasseh ben Israel, that far corner, and readmitting the Jewish to England could speed the redemption.

But we were in a much farther corner now, singing *Yah Ribon Olam*, “Lord Master of the World,” at the edge of the earth, halfway up a Chinese mountain, in the middle of a monsoon.

HaMelekh, the King sits on a throne that is exalted and lofty.

Among the things I learned that night, though, was a troubling fact about the escalator. It seems that in the morning, it goes downhill, bringing the masses to their offices and then it doesn't turn around to go uphill until 10:20 AM. I asked where the service would be by around 11:00 AM when, having hopped on at the earliest moment, we would probably arrive in shul. *Adon Olam* was the answer and suddenly the joy turned to gloom. We would have to leave early in the morning to walk up the mountain in the humidity, the heat and the rain. We descended from Midlevels after dinner, all the time wondering what it would be like to climb during the heat of the day.

Arriving at our hotel next to the Harbor, I entered the building to find two Jews who, by their dress and demeanor, were obviously observing Shabbat. I hadn't noticed them at Ohel Leah and asked where they had davened. “Right here,” they said. “What do you mean by right here?” I asked. “On the second floor,” one responded. Since we were staying on the fourth floor, I made a quick calculation and realized that our prospects were looking up.

“And where do you eat?” I went on, hoping that, contrary to my usual reticence, I might encourage an invitation for two. “In the same room where we daven,” he said. “And might there be room for two more for lunch?” The first Jew turned to the second—who happened to be the cook. “We have room for two more,” the cook said with a smile.

So God watches over His people Israel, far and wide, perhaps especially at the outer edges of His kingdom.

Shall I tell you about Singapore and about Bangkok and the Jews there, scattered as Menasseh ben Israel had never imagined? Another time, but the kernel of the story is the same.

There is a King of the Universe and His People lives throughout His realm. The Jews are an old people, a persistent people, a people that every year crowns its King on Rosh Hashanah.

We begin the journey of a New Year, perhaps finding the route up to Midlevels, climbing higher, and always hoping that there will be salvation at hand when times get rough.

Take it from me, that is how it works.