

A Jewish Home in the Far East

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On Saturday morning, the courtyard of Hong Kong's Ohel Leah Synagogue is filled with a diverse and colorful mix of Jews. Sounds of Hebrew, Portuguese, English, and French fill the air, but language and nationality seem irrelevant. As kiddush lunch begins, the seemingly endless chatter, along with the rambunctiousness of the many children, temporarily halts as Hebrew fills the air and the rabbi begins to recite the *kiddush*.

My husband and I arrived in Hong Kong nearly a decade ago; his work offered us the chance to go and we eagerly jumped at the opportunity. Though we were seasoned travelers, we knew these were no longer the backpacking days of our youth. As parents of young children, we needed to build our lives based on the values we brought with us: Judaism, family, education, and social justice.

Before we came, I was a card-carrying New York-centric, Conservative Jew who had already made allowances when I entered into a "mixed marriage" with my Reform husband, of the ultraliberal West Coast variety. At that time, it seemed the Jewish world was a carefully mapped out series of divisions among streams of Judaism — Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Modern Orthodox.

When we arrived in Hong Kong, a city with more than 7 million people, Westerners were but a tiny minority and Jews were (and still are) but a tiny fraction — numbering only a few thousand. I quickly discovered that the numbers wouldn't support the possibility of dividing ourselves by such delicately parsed group identities.

The resulting mixing and merging of classifications has had a profound impact on my family's Jewish path. For many secular and less observant Jews, there is a clear shift to becoming more observant, more connected to Judaism. The instinct to forge a stronger communal connection seems to become intensified when the roots of family and home no longer exist and the surrounding world is unfamiliar and foreign. Whereas Jews comfortable in melting-pot cultures often assimilate, here we purposefully congregate.

Along with many of our friends, perhaps counterintuitively, we decided to become kosher while living in a world where pork is

the staple in local households. Perhaps it's because "kosher" became our coveted comfort food in trying to ground our identity. It offers a taste of home, and on a very basic level, it has allowed us to embrace our Jewish identity in a world where cultural identities abound. Here, we are Jews, Americans, English speakers, and Hong Kong-based expatriates. The fluidity of cultural norms has allowed us to undergo a transition that we may have otherwise bypassed. With the absence of a codified classification system, we could try on habits of Judaism that wouldn't have fit with our backgrounds.

I discuss my "Sino-Syndrome" with a close friend, a traditional Jew, who originally hailed from an Orthodox-enclave in New York. For her, the syndrome was apparent also, but the manifestation was quite different. More observant Jews, now far removed from their enclaves and carefully carved out worlds, must undergo a huge paradigm shift that allows for the entry of secular Jews into their homes, schools, and synagogues. The boundaries of their compartmentalized worlds have also been made more fluid, and while their observance of halakhah isn't compromised, they are afforded more room to express their own individuality without the external pressures of conformity. It is a progression neither toward nor away from observance, but rather toward the freedom to individualize their traditions.

Sitting in Hong Kong's "Orthodox" synagogue during Shabbat, I reflect and rejoice on the Jewish life my husband and I have built here. I have grown to understand on a deeper level the connection between synagogue and home; our synagogue is both the house of God and the home where our community davens. It has become our home and the congregants our family.

The movement we have made to strengthen our personal connections to Judaism is not temporary. It is a permanent shift. The ease with which we and other three-culture Jews learn to create and reimagine a Jewish home while living abroad is a testimony to our ability to connect with one another on a level much deeper than the boundaries that denominations suggest. I have learned to simply be a Jew, and a more observant one at that.



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