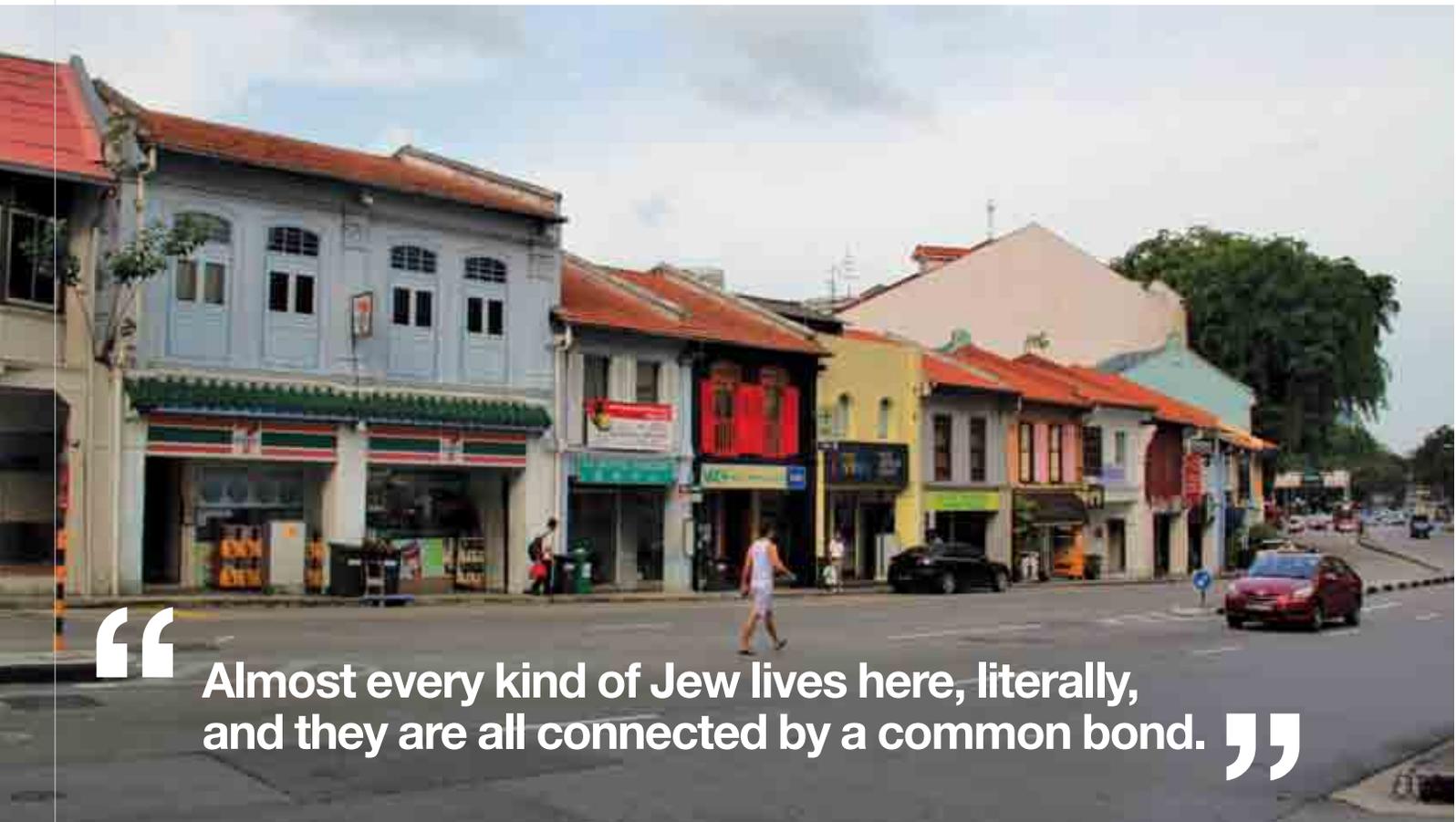


Singapore

BY ELIYAHU BENHIYOUN



“ Almost every kind of Jew lives here, literally, and they are all connected by a common bond. ”

It's an early Monday morning and impossibly humid. It's nearing 7:30 AM as I jump out of a cab half shouting to the driver, "Thank you, uncle!" Everyone in Singapore is "auntie" or "uncle," at least if they're older than you. *Shacharit* is about to begin at Chesed-El on Oxley-Rise Avenue. Usually, it's at the Ohel Yaakov Beit Midrash. On Mondays, though, the community gets together at Chesed-El so that this beauty of a synagogue is put to good use.

There are 2,000 Jewish souls living in Singapore, 160 of them locals. The remaining are expatriates living in Singapore for business or serving as ambassadors of some kind for their respective countries. The majority of these expatriates are Israeli, due to the close economic and mili-

tary ties that Singapore shares with Israel. There are also a fluctuating number of Jewish students in the international student exchange programs Singapore universities offer.

The community's headquarters are in the magnificent Jacob Ballas Center, where the Elite Kosher Shop and Awafi Restaurant are located. Take the elevator up six stories and you will find the *beit midrash*, where six Chabad yeshiva students are usually learning. This *beit midrash* is used for weekday *minyanim* and a monthly Friday night Ashkenazi *minyan*. Ashkenazi Jews living in Singapore enjoy the monthly *minyan* for its familiar Ashkenazic tunes, because the other *minyanim* are typically conducted in the traditional Sefardic tunes. The only kosher *mikvah*

in Singapore is also at the JBC. Singapore might be on the other side of the world, but this *mikvah* is of world class design. Alongside the JBC is the gorgeous Magen Avoth synagogue built in 1878, where Shabbat services take place.

A few blocks away on Oxley Rise, is the Chesed-El synagogue, an architectural masterpiece built on a hill and the only other *shul* in Singapore. Across the street is the Manasse Meyer School. A new grade is added each year and this year was its fourth. The community's rabbi and reb-betzin, Rabbi and Mrs. Abergel, opened the school in 1996. Kudos to them, now *frum* families can move to Singapore without worrying about their child's Torah education.

The community's standard is completely

Orthodox, although most of its members are traditional at best. Upholding a strong and vibrant Jewish community is very important to these Singaporean Jews, many of Iraqi descent. Part of this effort was to hire a rabbi who can cater to their needs as a Sefardic community and will also ensure their community's Jewish education and continued survival. Rabbi Mordechai Abergel, originally from Brussels and his wife Simcha, of Montreal, were hired in 1994 by the The Jewish Welfare Board of Singapore as the spiritual leaders of their community.

A unique element in this community is the sense of affinity amongst Jews living here. Most Jewish people living in Singapore feel that they are part of the community regardless of their affiliation to Judaism previously. Almost every kind of Jew lives here, literally, and they are all connected by a common bond. They make up 2,000 Jews among five million Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. There is nothing like a familiar Jewish face or spending Shabbat lunch singing *zemirot* in a place so far from the rest of the world's Jews.

Singapore is an island and a city-state. The entire country has a radius of 274 miles, which means you can drive from one border to the next in three hours. Driving is on the left side and the official language is English, reminiscent of the recent British rule over Singapore, which ended in 1963.

Singapore is a very modern, well developed, and safe country. Any child or woman walking alone at night can be fairly certain they won't be accosted. Unless you pass by an outdoor café selling durian, which will leave you wondering how a fruit smelling so awful can become a nation's favorite snack. The cleanliness in Singapore is legendary and yes, you can be fined 300 Singapore dollars, or Sing, as referred to by the locals, for littering. And, of course, gum can't be bought in Singapore.

Cost of Living

HEALTH INSURANCE

About \$300 per month.

Singapore natives enjoy free insurance.

AUTO INSURANCE

About \$1,800 CGD per year

Additionally, there is a road tax (called ERP—Electronic Road Pricing—similar to tolls, but automatically deducted by passing through gate-like fixtures every few miles) is about \$1,200 per year depending on engine size.

There is a limit to how many cars can be on the road due to Singapore's small size. A car in Singapore costs almost ten times the amount it would cost in the U.S.

COST OF GRAPE JUICE

64 oz. Kedem—\$10



WEATHER

Glad you think the headache's over once you get over the jet lag. The moment your face touches Singapore air for the first time you are in for a transcendental experience. It's usually between 80 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit and almost 100 percent humidity. Make sure you have a few extra sets of clothing with you because chances are you'll be showering a few times daily. Ok la?

When it comes to kosher there is only one address—the JBC or the Jacob Ballas Center. Every Friday, the Elite kosher shop is hustling and bustling with women pushing baby carriages or even a maid buying chicken, meat, or quality wines for Shabbat. Rabbi Abergel *shechts* close to 200 chickens weekly and meat is imported from Australia. All other kosher products come from Israel biannually.

The Jewish Welfare Board maintains a home for the elderly and disadvantaged called the Abdullah Shooker Home.

The first Jews to settle in Singapore were of Baghdadi origin. They first passed through India and finally settled in Singapore when it was established as a trading post in 1819. There were over 1,500 Jewish inhabitants by 1939, when the

Getting There

Traveling to Singapore is no easy task, although pretty straight-forward. Allow me to explain. Singapore is only a plane ride away. But there are a few things to keep in mind before making the trip. It's an 18-hour plane ride from New York without stopovers. You're looking at almost an entire day and night of traveling. (Tip: Singapore Airlines offers awesome service.) Another thing to keep in mind is the 13-hour time difference. As you shop on Orchard Road, a shop-till-you-drop kinda road, jet lag will be ever present.

Real Estate



Rent is about \$5,000 USD for a 1,500 sq. foot residential space.

Houses...there is no average. Houses and apartments are similar to Manhattan pricing.... It's very rare to own a house in Singapore though.

Japanese took over Singapore. Many of the Jews were interned by the Japanese. As a result of the war, many emigrated to Australia, England, the United States, and Israel. By the late 1960s, the community dwindled to approximately 450. Today, there are just over 300 local Jews left.

Jews have taken a considerable part in the political and economic life of Singapore. In 1955, David S. Marshall, the icon of Singapore Jewry, became the first chief minister of the Republic and Dr. Yayah Cohen became Surgeon General. Jacob Ballas, who was once chairman of the Singapore Stock Exchange and Manasse Meyer left large trusts which support many charitable causes in Singapore and abroad to this day. ●