



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The Japanese Abraham

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

THERE'S A BESTSELLING BOOK by the psychologist Robert Cialdini titled *Pre-Suasion: A Revolutionary Way to Influence and Persuade*. In one point in this largely non-Jewish book, we are shown a photograph from 1941 of two rabbis from Eastern Europe who found themselves in front of the Japanese foreign ministry in Tokyo. They were two of the leaders from a group of thousands of yeshiva students who had been given transit visas by the Japanese consul in Kovno, Lithuania. His name was Chiune Sugihara. The visas allowed the students to flee across Europe and Asia and land in Kobe, Japan. Two of them were my maternal grandparents, Rabbi Shmuel Dovid and Nachama Warshavchik.

Germany was, of course, then allied with Japan. Cialdini writes, "The Nazis had sent Josef Meisinger, a colonel in the Gestapo known as 'the Butcher of Warsaw' for ordering the execution of 16,000 Poles, to Tokyo. Upon his arrival in April 1941, Meisinger began pressing for a policy of brutality toward the Jews under Japan's rule—a policy he stated he would gladly help design and enact. Uncertain at first of how to respond and wanting to hear all sides, high-ranking members of Japan's military government called upon the Jewish refugee community to send two leaders to a meeting that would influence their future significantly."

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Two rabbis came down from Kobe to Tokyo, and, in what must have seemed a surreal moment, met with the Japanese generals. The rabbis received an utterly unanswerable question: *Tell us, why do the Nazis hate you so much?* One of the rabbis was frozen, terrified, but the second, Shimon Kalisch, known as the Amshinover Rebbe, remained calm. Cialdini writes:

Rabbi Kalisch's knowledge of human nature had equipped him to deliver the most impressive persuasive communication I have encountered in over thirty years of studying the process: "Because," he said calmly, "we are Asian, like you."

The older rabbi's response had a powerful effect on the Japanese officers. After a silence, they conferred among themselves and announced a recess. When they returned, the most senior military official rose and granted the reassurance the rabbis had hoped to bring home to their community: "Go back to your people. Tell them we will provide for their safety and peace. You have nothing to fear while in Japanese territory." And so it was.

The photograph featured in Cialdini's book is (at least in my Kindle version) incomplete, cut off; in the original, there is a Japanese gentleman standing to one side of Rabbi Kalisch. This man's name is Setsuzo Kotsuji, and his tale is told in his extraordinary 1962 autobiography, *From Tokyo To Jerusalem*, which is

entirely out of print. Kotsuji's obscurity is an enormous shame, because the book is much more than a memoir. It is, in a certain sense, a religious classic, the story of a man raised in the religion of his ancestors who turned to the Jewish faith while still retaining a deep respect for his own Japanese past. These elements merged together to form one of the great heroic personalities of the 20th century.

Kotsuji was truly an Asian Jew: *From Tokyo to Jerusalem* is not published under the name Setsuzo Kotsuji, but rather Abraham Kotsuji, the name he would ultimately adopt in converting to Judaism. This is apt, as one of the mesmerizing themes of the book is how his own life mirrors that of Abraham, and how his heroism allows for the Abrahamic journeys of so many others to come to fruition. Discovering Kotsuji's story has given me a better understanding of my own Abrahamic familial identity.

Setsuzo Kotsuji was born in Kyoto in 1899 to a family that was bound up with the Shinto faith and with the Kamo Shinto shrine of Kyoto, where for many generations his own family had served as priests. "I was raised," he tells us, "in that ancient religion of Shinto, a religion existing already at the dawn of the history of Japan." He adds that the "Kotsuji family, according to tradition, dates back to 678 A.D., when the Kamo shrine in the Kamo section of Kyoto was dedicated." By his generation, the Kotsujis were no longer priests, but his father did dedicate himself, and then train his son Setsuzo, to perform for the family one of the major rites of Shinto, the "lighting of the sacred fire."

Writing about himself in third person, he describes one of the earliest and elemental memories of his life:

The first of these images is symbolic and prophetic. The baby Setschan is perhaps four. He sees two flickering lights—whether they are oil lamps or candles he cannot tell. He hears a voice reciting words unintelligible to his small mind, but it's recognizable as the voice of his father. The image is a pair of oil lamps, wavering on the Shinto altar, and the voice is the short prayer of evening. The image will haunt Setschan for the rest of his life. He needs merely recall it to invoke a mood of solemnity, of awe, a deep religious feeling which neither teacher nor preacher could ever have taught him.

What this means is that even as Kotsuji would ultimately embrace a different faith, the experience of

Shinto as a child, and his reverence for the past, would continue to guide him on his journey. The same can be said, he tells us, for the moral code he encountered in his community and his family: Bushido. This is "the way of the samurai," and Kotsuji insists it is misunderstood as relating merely to military matters, for it is actually a code of honor and chivalry. Bushido is far more than a code of war," he writes. "It is difficult not to love and respect the man who adheres to the genuine Bushido code."

This, then, is the early life of Setsuzo Kotsuji. But suddenly an Abrahamic element introduced itself. Though Abraham was called by God at the age of 75, the rabbinic tradition describes how his own religious journey to monotheism began through his own questioning as a child. The same can be said for Kotsuji. He happened to come upon a Bible in a bookstore and started to read. He was, he tells us in his memoir, confused by its description of a single God creating the world, but then, he writes, one passage in particular suddenly moved him.

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." What God? I asked myself. What does the combination "Lord God" mean in the second chapter?... I skipped a few pages, turning at random, and stopped without plan or design at Chapter 12. There my eyes fell upon the words, "Now the Lord said unto Abram. Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land I will shew thee. And will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee. I will bless those that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee; and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."

At that moment something great and deep took hold of my empty mind. I knew almost nothing about Israel and her destiny, nothing of the history of the Jewish people. Yet the pages of the book I read to that point seemed to culminate in this great call.... I did not understand it exactly, and I was not sure precisely what was meant by the blessing. Yet the notion of Abraham breaking away from his home to go on a journey from which he could not return, as the chosen instrument of the Lord, inspired me and moved me deeply.

Thus did Setsuzo Kotsuji discover the beginnings of the Jewish people, when Abram is asked in Mesopotamia to journey to a faraway land, to a holy land. While this Bible he had discovered contained



Abraham (Setsuzo) Kotsuji.

both Jewish and Christian scripture, he was drawn particularly to the texts of the Old Testament, because “there was something familiar about it to my young Japanese mind.”

One of the most striking aspects of Kotsuji’s memoir is the fact that he was particularly inspired by the section of the Hebrew book that many modern Jews, let alone non-Jews, find irrelevant. That is Leviticus, which describes the ritual to be performed in the Tabernacle, and ultimately the Temple in Jerusalem. The rituals involve an altar, incense, and the kindling of the oil lamps in the temple candelabra. It is therefore not surprising, given his own past, that the book struck him. “Leviticus,” he writes, “reminded me of Shinto,” adding that in Shinto, “there is a distinction made between holy and unclean, equivalent to the Hebrew *kodesh* and *tame*. It is not an exaggeration to say that the religion is a kind of Hebrew Shinto.”

In discovering this Hebrew faith, he knew he wished to embrace it. Weeping, he told his mother that he could not participate in Shinto rituals because he found what he called “the Shinto of Israel.” While his mother had never heard of “Israel,” her response

was striking. “Well,” she said, “whatever the name and whatever the religion I have faith in your good nature. You cannot grow up to be a bad man.” His father responded likewise. His mother told him: “Your father admits that you are doing well these days. He thinks it may be due to the book you are so eagerly reading. He says that if this is so, it must be an excellent book, and the religion in it is good. And if God is only One, he would have it only that way. You may go ahead with your new faith, only remember your ancestors, and be proud of your great heritage.”

This, in turn, had an impact on Setsuzo for the rest of his life: “My parting from the Shinto ritual was a grave loss for both her and my father; yet out of love for me they found the goodness to make it a peaceful one, one which did not rupture our relationship. Their intelligent attitude left me forever with a good feeling about Shinto.”

Kotsuji originally embraced Christianity, the only biblically based faith he found in Japan. In 1916, he went to Kyoto, where he studied in an American Presbyterian college for seven years. There he learned English, Latin, German, and Greek—but not the language of the people with whom he had been for so

long fascinated. He then journeyed to Hokkaido, the northernmost of the four islands of Japan, and met and married a woman of the Christian community there, Mineko Iwane.

As a Christian, Kotsuji embraced the role of a minister of the Gospel in Gifu, a town in central Japan, but his ultimate dreams led him to America, where he felt he could find someone qualified to teach him Hebrew. And here another amazing parallel to the original Abraham emerges. The original covenantal Abraham, as we know, had a covenantal partner, Sarah; and Kotsuji's own wife Mineko sought to support his journey with her one source of wealth: exquisite kimono that her father had given her through the years. He describes the conversation with his wife:

I will sell my kimonos.

No, I said, I can't allow you to give up anything so important to you.

Did Abraham's wife carry many kimonos with her when she followed her husband from Ur? she demanded.

No, I admitted.

Then I will follow the example of Sarah, she said.

Thus, just as Abram in Genesis went with Sarai his wife far away from his father's home in Mesopotamia to the other end of the known earth, Setsuzo and Mineko went far away from the land of their forefathers.

In 1927, they sailed for San Francisco, where he first learned of Judaism existing in communal form. "To me, this simple fact was a stirring piece of news," he writes. "It was confirmation that the religion of the Old Testament was alive, was immediate, and was practiced in some measure at least as it had been thousands of years before." He then went on to Auburn Theological Seminary in New York. Hebrew was not part of the required curriculum, so he had to take that as an addition, or as he put it, "I resolved to study my Hebrew from eight at night until two in the morning."

He finished all Auburn had to offer in a year and a half, and then chose to study with a Semitics scholar at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. He learned to drive and bought an old Oldsmobile for forty bucks. It could barely move, and driving with his wife through Gallup, New Mexico—known in American musical lore as one of the places you can stop if you want to "get your kicks on Route 66"—with only 16 cents left to

their name, the car died on the main street. And then, as with Abraham, a miracle occurred:

Despair in my heart, I looked around and saw that I had been vouchsafed a miracle. The car had given up the ghost directly in front of a Japanese restaurant. During the several days we spent in Gallup, waiting for money to come from a friend in Berkeley, the townspeople received us cordially and took good care of us. If they still live, my gratitude goes out to Mr. Yoshimi and Mr. Hayashi, of Gallup.

Thus were they saved by two Japanese Americans living in Gallup, and another biblical parallel was made manifest. For if there is any element that appears in the biblical tale of Abraham's family, it is that angels, literal angels or human messengers of the Divine, present themselves at various moments to help figures on their journey.

In Berkeley, Kotsuji finished his thesis on Semitics. He and his wife returned to Japan in 1931 and taught Old Testament and Semitic languages at Ayoma Gakuin University in Tokyo. Soon, however, he was struck with typhoid, which led him to lose his job. In 1934, he founded his own institute in Tokyo, the Institute of Biblical Research. In 1937, he published what was the first Hebrew grammar in Japanese and set the stage for his becoming the greatest Hebrew authority in Japan—or in a certain sense, the *only* Hebrew authority in Japan.

Then, at the end of the 1930s, he was offered a job by a man by the name of Yosuke Matsuoka, who was the head of the South Manchuria Railway. Knowing that there was a substantial Jewish presence in Manchuria, Matsuoka felt he needed a guide to Jewish issues. Of course, Kotsuji didn't know any Jews at the time, but in Manchuria he actually found himself among a vibrant Jewish community. Soon after, however, he lost his job, when Yosuke Matsuoka became the foreign minister of wartime Japan; because Matsuoka had hired him, he writes, he was bound by tradition to depart as well. Again, we might have thought this would have been a professional setback for Kotsuji, but the fact that he had gotten to know the future foreign minister of Japan would prove providential.

Kotsuji moved to Kamakura, a town in Tokyo Bay. It was then that he heard of the arrival of the Jews in Kobe: Jews who, having received the visas from Sugihara in Kovno in the beginning of the 1940s, suddenly found themselves on an Abrahamic journey of their own. They, too, had been called to leave their home and to make their way across the ends of the

earth to a place Providence had prepared. Jews who had never been anywhere in their lives boarded the trans-Siberian railway, crossed Europe and Asia to Vladivostok, and then for three days took a ferry across the Sea of Japan.

We have to imagine what it was for these Jewish rabbinical students and rabbis to discover Japan, how different from Poland it was. And perhaps one difference stood out above all: In Japan, trains left and arrived on schedule. The ferry arrived at the coastal city of Tsuruga on Friday afternoon, with the Sabbath only several hours away. As Marvin Tokayer describes in his book *The Fugu Plan*, the Amshinover Rebbe refused to board. Tokayer tells us of one of the Jews who had come to greet him: “Rebbe,” he said, “you needn’t worry about not being safely in Kobe by 5:23. Japanese trains are extremely punctual. We will arrive at 4:15, in plenty of time.” Tokayer adds, “The old man had no experience with Japanese trains, but he had had a great deal of experience with Polish trains.” They never went anywhere on time.

As the train began pulling out at exactly the time for which departure had been called, the Rebbe changed his mind:

With more hope in his heart than confidence, he stepped aboard the train as it inched forward. As if suddenly released from an invisible force, the refugees raced for the train, jumping through the doors, scrambling through the windows, clinging to the railings as it slowly gathered momentum. By the time the final car had passed the end of the platform, even the slowest had managed to get aboard. The engineer shook his head in amazement at the customs of these strange foreigners and accelerated to normal departure speed.

Thus did these Jews arrive in Kobe. But they faced a terrible problem. Sugihara’s visas were transit visas, officially given for those traveling to Curaçao (in the Eastern Caribbean, off the coast of Venezuela) as an ultimate destination. But these transit visas would expire after 10 days. Of course, they had nowhere to go. Thus it was that in desperation these Jews, arriving in Japan,

turned to a Japanese person who had had experience with Jews.

Kotsuji tells us that “the Kobe Jewish committee had heard of me through my work in Manchuria... was it possible, they asked, for me to intervene.” To represent foreigners in Japan was at this point dangerous. But in perhaps the most important passage in his memoir, one that reveals profoundly who this remarkable man was, Kotsuji tells us his two sources of inspiration in deciding to take action. First, the Bushido, the samurai moral code his parents had taught him; and second, the Hebrew Bible: “There is a Bushido saying which goes ‘it is cowardice not to do, seeing one ought’; running away from the trouble went against the grain of my youthful samurai trained notions of honor. Further supporting me were words of the Old Testament: ‘the grass withereth, but the word of God shall stand forever.’”

We must pause to ponder the passage, to marvel at the merging of two different cultures and traditions in this act of heroism, the small boy merging with the profound moral adult.

Kotsuji went to the foreign ministry and met everyone, but in vain. Then he met his former boss, the foreign minister, Yosuke Matsuoka, and said, “Now I have come to the minister himself, to tell him of my sorrow.” Matsuoka asked to meet for lunch, far away from the foreign ministry. During this meeting, he advised Kotsuji that if he really wanted to extend the Jewish visitors’ visas, he should seek instead the approval of local

authorities in Kobe, the police there. Thus, for a period of several months, Kotsuji became the most unusual of commuters, traveling from the Tokyo suburbs every 10 days, wining and dining the local officials. In so doing, he became an intimate of the Eastern European Jews who had arrived there. As he tells us, “I traveled from Kamakura to Kobe—a trip of twelve hours—once or twice a week....The police became most cooperative. They allowed the refugees to open a Talmud Torah [a Jewish school] and were as helpful as they dared to be.”

Thus did Kotsuji help ensure the well-being of my grandparents and so many others, until, later in the year, when they were moved by Japan to occupied Shanghai. Throughout, he tended to their needs,

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including when the lay leaders of the Jewish community were telephoned in Tokyo and asked to send some of their most prominent figures to meet with the department of military affairs. Incredibly, Kotsuji then chose to publish a book in Japan during the war, a book responding to Nazi calumnies against the Jews. He titled his book *The True Character of the Jewish People*—which led to much hardship and great risk to his life during the war.

At the end of the 1950s, he chose to convert to Judaism, journeying to Jerusalem to do so:

Some of my Jewish friends questioned my decision. Why adopt a religion which is so likely to bring troubles and sorrow? My response was that I would come to Judaism with joy and pride. From my suffering for the Jewish cause, my attachment to Judaism had grown and grown, and with it had grown my affection for the Jewish people. My unshaken belief in One God lived together in my heart with the love of his people. It seemed only natural for me to become one of them.

Kotsuji was circumcised when he was almost 60, taking the Jewish name of Abraham. As documented by David Mandelbaum in his book *From Lublin to Shanghai*, after his conversion, Kotsuji was welcomed as a Jew by one of the most famous rabbis in Israel, whom he had first met in Kobe, Chaim Shmuelevitz. Then Kotsuji delivered a speech in Hebrew, the Hebrew he loved, citing Ruth: “My people shall be your people, and your God my God.”

When he passed away 50 years ago, Kotsuji was buried on a mountain in Jerusalem, known as Har HaMenuchot. On another mountain in Jerusalem lies the grave of my grandfather, who after the war went from Shanghai to America and then Israel. Both of them—Kotsuji and my grandfather—had made journeys of faith around the world, journeys from their original home, just like the original Abraham. And just like the original Abraham, both their journeys ended in the Holy Land. And the intersection of these Abra-

hamic journeys had a direct effect on my own life.

Here we have a man raised to honor his ancestral heritage but who cherished the scripture of Israel; a man who knew Japanese and Hebrew; a man who loved Abraham’s journey and suddenly found Jews on a miraculous journey of their own; a man inspired to act by the combination of samurai sayings and Semitic scripture; a man who paved his own unique path and suddenly was providentially positioned to help thousands of others in one precise moment.

Do I not owe Kotsuji the gratitude, as a descendant of those Jews, to include him in the picture that is my own life, my own sense of self? If Kotsuji is cut out of the picture of Cialdini’s book, if he is largely unknown, does that not make me all the more obligated to include him in the picture that is my own family history?

The story of Kotsuji, interestingly, has been recently more publicized in Japan than in America, thanks to the gifted Japanese actor Jundai Yamada, who recently wrote a book about him. And in 2022, a member of the Israeli Knesset traveled to Japan to bestow a letter of recognition upon Kotsuji’s then 91-year-old daughter.

But we in America need to remember Kotsuji again, especially in the difficult time facing the Jewish people, when the anti-Semitism that Kotsuji stood against is rearing its ugly head around the world. We also know that Kotsuji would have seen, in the Jewish resiliency and unity now reflected in the Holy Land, in Israel, and around the world, what he called in his book the “true character of the Jewish people.” Thanks to his book, I will remember Abraham Kotsuji, a beacon of moral clarity in a dark time, illustrating how, then as now, we Jews remember who stood against anti-Semitism, who stood with us at difficult moments.

It is reported that when Setsuzo Kotsuji passed away he recognized the complexity of his story by leaving this final statement to his family: “Perhaps in a hundred years, someone will understand me.” It is now 50 years since his death. Let us seek to understand, and commemorate Kotsuji’s life with gratitude and reverence. 🙏