

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES 26

Koreans and Jews

Cherie S. Lewis



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I dedicate this work to the memory of my dear friend Rabbi Michael J. Harel. Prior to his death in 1992, Rabbi Harel served as a force for better relations among ethnic groups. As the spiritual leader of the Jewish community of Taipei in 1989-90, he interacted with local Chinese and Taiwanese citizens and helped them better understand Jewish tradition. And in his travels to Seoul, Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Singapore, he shared his knowledge of Jewish life with both Asians and Jews. May this report inspire others to carry on his important work.

C. S. L.

FOREWORD

This publication of the American Jewish Committee's Pacific Rim Institute is a thoughtful and scholarly study of the past and present links between Jews and Koreans. It is intended to enhance dialogue between these two ancient peoples.

Dramatic changes in the cultural, political, and economic circumstances of Jews and Koreans, especially in our century, have brought unprecedented opportunities for collaboration. Millions of Jews and Koreans live in "diaspora" in various parts of the world. Both groups have been victimized and share the experience of trying to survive in hostile environments. Korea and Israel have been attacked repeatedly by unfriendly neighbors.

The recent settlement of many Koreans in the United States has put them in direct touch with major concentrations of Jewish population. For these Koreans today, as for Jews a few generations ago, the transition from relative cultural isolation to the pluralism of modernity opens up possibilities for personal development and economic growth, but also calls historical traditions into question.

People with ancient and sophisticated cultures have a problem maintaining their traditions when they move to new places. The Koreans and Jews who conduct businesses and professional activities in the diverse, multiethnic United States often live in mixed-residential areas and participate in activities outside of their own ethnic communities. As a result, they come to see their ethnic and American identities as separate; in some settings they act as Americans, in others as Koreans or Jews.

Nevertheless, contemporary American society allows minorities to flourish and does not prevent the preservation of particular forms of communal expression. Furthermore, it is considered perfectly legitimate to give children an education in a particular ethnic or religious culture so that the heritage can be transmitted to future generations. For Jews, all of this is reinforced by the networks of association between the Israeli and American communities. For many diaspora Koreans as well, the influence of Korean culture and an emphasis on education in the ethnic tradition remain important.

All immigrant groups, Jews and Koreans among them, face problems of economic adjustment. Indeed, many of the small stores and businesses now owned by Koreans were formerly run by Jews. As the second and third generations of Jews moved on to professional and corporate careers, Koreans were among those who replaced them in the ethnic succession. And now the upward mobility of Koreans, like that of other groups before them,

is breeding resentment that occasionally flares into conflict and open violence. Many Korean Americans, who had thought that hard work would lead to success and upward mobility, are facing the harsh realities of intergroup conflict. And just as such challenges to Jews led to the creation of the American Jewish Committee and other Jewish defense organizations, the Korean community today is organizing so that it can enter coalitions against xenophobia, racism, and urban crime.

Cooperation between Koreans and Jews is emerging on the global scene as well. The admission of South Korea to the UN has been followed by a reassessment of that country's cooperation with the Arab economic boycott of Israel. The reopening of the Israeli embassy in Seoul, the opening of a Korean embassy in Israel, and Korea's courageous cosponsorship of the UN resolution repealing the Zionism-is-racism vote provide evidence of a rapprochement based on a common interest in democracy, regional stability, and world peace. Some of the Christian churches in Korea deserve considerable credit for stimulating pro-Israel feelings, and Kon-kuk University has taken the initiative in arranging scientific and technological exchanges with Israel.

Both Koreans and Jews have found political equality, religious liberty, and cultural opportunity in the United States, and therefore have a major stake in its future. As the two groups work to deepen an appreciation of their ancestral traditions, they also share a responsibility with all other Americans to strengthen democratic institutions and work for justice and human rights. Clearly, Jews, with their uniquely cosmopolitan understanding of blended cultures, and Koreans, with their special qualities of language loyalty, religious enthusiasm, and creative effort, have important roles to play in the future of our country. The experiences of Jews and Koreans can be utilized for mutual benefit and for the welfare of the nation as a whole.

Bruce M. Ramer, *Chairman*
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KOREANS AND JEWS

Koreans had a rare chance to learn about Jewish tradition in September, 1992 when American Jewish novelist Chaim Potok delivered a series of lectures in South Korea under the auspices of the American government. Visiting the country as part of the "Arts in America" program of the U.S. Information Agency, Rabbi Potok spoke of Jewish ethnicity and the challenge of living as a minority group in the United States, themes that pervade his novels. His Korean audiences were fascinated. Just a few months before, Korean Americans had been caught up in the interethnic hostilities of the Los Angeles riots. Since Korea is a relatively homogeneous society, the minority-group experience is strange to Koreans, both in the homeland and in the United States. Indeed, the invitation to Potok originated in a request to the American Embassy in Seoul to provide someone who could address this topic.¹

Not only was Potok a natural choice because of his explorations of ethnicity, but also because two of his books reflect a knowledge of Korea and its culture. In the 1950s, Potok spent sixteen months in the country as a military chaplain, an experience reflected in his novel *The Book of Lights*. A more recent novel, *I Am the Clay*, tells of Koreans in wartime. In his lectures—covered extensively by the Korean press—Potok reflected on the impact of his time in Korea on his writing career. Observing a different culture, he noted, helped him develop a fresh perspective on his own. In a recent interview, Potok discussed affinities between Jews and Koreans. "They both have a respect for ancient texts and a high regard for tradition," he said. And both groups respect the elderly, value education, and have histories of suffering that affect their respective views of the world.²

Historical Perspectives

Christian Missionaries. The dust jacket of Potok's *The Book of Lights* describes the main character: "It is this young man—raised in the absolute belief that 'the Jewish religion made a fundamental difference in the world'—who, at the end of the Korean War, finds himself a chaplain in a country where Judaism has played no part, has had no reality, has never existed."

Much of East Asia does give this impression to both the casual tourist and the serious scholar. Yet Korea is a bit different. Although Judaism has played almost no part in the development of Korean culture, Christianity has had a pivotal role in Korean life, especially in the twentieth century, and this, in turn, has influenced what Koreans know and believe about Jews, Judaism, and the State of Israel.

Knowledge of Jewish tradition first entered the Korean peninsula with the coming in 1784 of the first wave of Christian missionaries—primarily French Catholic priests—who discussed the Old Testament with local Koreans. Strongly opposed by the Korean authorities, they made few converts. A second wave of missionaries was far more successful. Starting in 1884, American Protestant missionaries came and specialized in medical work, which was accepted and welcomed. These Americans brought not only the Protestant religion but also American concepts of democracy, equality, and independence. By aligning themselves with the Korean struggle to maintain independence from neighboring Japan, the missionaries gained great popularity and many converts. This contrasted sharply with the situation in China and elsewhere, where missionaries were perceived as apologists for Western imperialism.³

Since they promoted Korean nationalism and independence from Japan, the missionaries in Korea naturally tended to emphasize those parts of the Bible containing these ideas. Of particular interest to Koreans was the account of the exodus from Egypt and the leadership of Moses in the emancipation of the Israelites from slavery and political domination. Thus in 1908 a leader of the Korean Methodist Church stated: “It is Christianity that will rescue our Taehan race from the hands of the enemy, just as the children of Israel were delivered from Egypt.” According to Kenneth Wells, “the most popular justification of Christian nationalism” was the “symbolic identification of the Korean race with ancient Israel and the Protestant church with the remnant community that brings about restoration.” So strongly did the restoration theme capture the popular imagination that one Korean newspaper ran a series of articles in 1916 on the nation-building activities of Ezra and Nehemiah, the biblical Jewish leaders who brought their people back to Judea after seventy years of exile in Babylonia.⁴

The traditional Jewish concepts of homeland and exile also resonate with Koreans. Jews everywhere view the Land of Israel as their promised land, and many prayers focus on the hope of return, an aspiration concretized by the Zionist movement of the twentieth century. Areas outside this land are categorized as exile. In the same years that Zionism was doing its pioneering work, many Korean nationalists left Korea because of Japanese domination in the country. Wherever they found refuge, they considered themselves, like Jews, sojourners, waiting for an opportunity to return from exile to the homeland. Even using the term “diaspora,” they developed a repatriation ideology similar to Zionism.⁵

Another biblical theme of great significance to Koreans is the story of the Jewish Queen Esther, who was instrumental in saving the Jews from harm in ancient Persia. Esther’s loyalty to her family and service to her people fit well with traditional Korean moral values and was often used as an example to young girls studying in missionary schools. The story was a popular theme for school plays. Yim Louise, an elderly woman, recalls what it was like to play the part of Queen Esther:

As I walked on the stage and looked out at the audience of girls and parents, I was transformed. The words I had rehearsed so carefully took on a new meaning. They seemed to fit the present as well as the past. When I pleaded with King Ahasuerus to save the Hebrews, the words became a plea for Korea. And the meaning of my lines . . . was clearly understood by the audience.

Not surprisingly, the Japanese, who opposed Korean expressions of independence, tried to

have performances of the Queen Esther story banned in missionary schools. They understood that many Koreans identified the king in the story with the Japanese emperor.⁶

If Bible study influenced many Koreans to identify symbolically with the people of Israel and their leaders, some even began to claim direct genetic descent from the Israelites. The theory that Koreans—and Japanese—come from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel developed soon after the arrival of the Protestant missionaries, and it was popularized in two books written in 1879 by a Scotsman living in Japan.⁷ The story is still alive today, though it is hard to know how many people believe it. In 1988, a Korean-American journalist wrote a newspaper column about his own great-aunt, who believed she was descended from the lost tribe of Dan.⁸

Current Korean interest in Jews and Judaism owes much to the significant role that Christianity plays in the country. According to official statistics, of the approximately two-fifths of the population that considers itself religious, 46.9 percent are Buddhists, 37.7 percent Protestants, and 10.8 percent Catholics. Thus the combined Christian population constitutes almost half of those who identify with a particular religion. In addition, the Christian element tends to be highly educated and therefore well represented in leadership positions that require significant contact with Westerners. Adding to the Christian influence on Korean-Western relations, approximately 90 percent of Korean Americans are Christian.⁹

The extensive publication and distribution of Bibles multiplies the impact of Christianity in Korea and enhances the image of Korean Christianity abroad. As of October 30, 1992, the Korean Bible Society had published over 5 million copies in 138 languages and distributed them in 103 nations, making South Korea the largest producer of Bibles in the world.¹⁰

The Russo-Japanese War. Though Jewish themes entered Korea in the eighteenth century, Jews themselves did not arrive till the twentieth century. Like Chaim Potok, they came in time of war: the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, which was fought over control of Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula. Japan's victory over Russia marked the first time that an East Asian nation inflicted a major military defeat on a European power.

For Korea, the result of the war was the establishment of a Japanese protectorate over the country and then, in 1910, formal annexation to Japan, a status that lasted until 1945. Thus all aspects of Korean culture and society were heavily influenced by Japan over the first half of the century—including attitudes toward Jews. For Jewish history, the significance of the war was twofold: the coming of Jews to the country and the development of the influential myth of Jewish power in the world banking community.

Jews came to Korea as part of the Russian army. Most had been drafted. They ranged from uneducated foot soldiers taken from small villages to physicians and nurses from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Some Jews volunteered to fight in the hope that evidence of Jewish patriotism in wartime might induce Russia to grant Jews civil rights. And there were also Jews who had previously joined the army and were serving as professional soldiers. Approximately 33,000 Jews fought for Russia, and 3,000 of them perished.¹¹

The myth of global Jewish financial power grew out of American Jewish hostility

toward Russia, fueled by years of government-tolerated anti-Semitic outrages, culminating in the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. Jacob Schiff, a leading international investment banker in New York and a founder of the American Jewish Committee, used his influence to raise loans for Japan's military effort and to keep Russia from getting such loans. By helping Japan achieve victory, Schiff became a hero in that country. On a visit to Japan, he had lunch with the emperor at the Imperial Palace, a rare honor for a foreigner. Schiff's prominence planted the idea in both Japan and Korea that Jewish bankers had unlimited access to money.¹²

While the myth of Jewish power originated in East Asia in a positive context, it quickly turned negative under the influence of the notoriously anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forgery perpetrated by the czarist secret police. It purported to be the record of an international Jewish conspiracy to gain control of the world. The *Protocols* reached East Asia in the early twentieth century from cities in eastern Siberia, and later editions were carried eastward by White Russians—many of them extremely anti-Semitic—fleeing the chaos of the Russian Revolution. The recent memory of Schiff's key role in the Russo-Japanese War inclined political, business, and military leaders to lend credence to the *Protocols*, both in Japan and Korea. In their minds, Schiff's initiatives were not simply responses to a particular international situation, but standard Jewish operating procedure. The myth of Jewish power was introduced into Japanese and Korean schools. Ironically, the idea that Jews had powerful coreligionists around the world helped save those who fled eastward from the Nazis in World War II: respecting their alleged "clout," the Japanese allowed these Jews to settle in areas they controlled.¹³

The Korean War and Its Aftermath. Despite achieving independence from Japan with the end of World War II, Korea remained occupied by foreign troops, the Soviet Union in the north, the United States in the south. In 1948, the division of the peninsula was formalized by the establishment of the Republic of Korea in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north. On June 25, 1950, the North Korean army invaded South Korea. A combined force of American, South Korean, and United Nations troops from sixteen countries fought the invaders and their Chinese allies. Nearly 34,000 Americans died in the conflict and more than 103,000 were wounded before an armistice was signed in 1953.

Like the Russo-Japanese War, the Korean War brought Jews to Korea. At one point in the conflict, so many Jewish soldiers were serving that twelve Jewish chaplains were assigned to conduct High Holiday services. One of the chaplains, Oscar Lifschitz, recalled "how strange it was conducting a religious service with weapons next to each chair. The concept is so paradoxical. War and guns. The synagogue a veritable arsenal! There was no telling but that the enemy might appear." He reported that many Koreans—who knew of Jews only from what they had heard from Christian missionaries—came to see the service, and were especially fascinated by the sounding of the shofar.¹⁴

Another chaplain was Chaim Potok, who, in his *Book of Lights*, portrays the effort of a chaplain to discuss his tradition with local Koreans. The fictional Rabbi Arthur Leiden tries to connect with them by describing the Jewish holidays: Hanukkah commemorates a war of liberation, Purim is about oppressed minorities, and Passover teaches of freedom from slavery. In all likelihood, similar conversations have taken place between Koreans and American soldiers stationed in the country in the years since the war. Rabbi Kenneth Zisook, who recently completed a tour of duty as a chaplain in Korea, has noted an interesting

correlation between Korean and Jewish fears about intermarriage. Both groups see themselves as small minorities threatened by assimilation.¹⁵

Today, Jewish members of the armed forces can participate in Shabbat and holiday services at the Yongsan Army Base, just south of downtown Seoul. Both a synagogue and a library are located on the premises, overseen by a rabbi who serves as a U. S. military chaplain. The lay leader of the community is Larry Rosenberg.

There are also fewer than 200 Jews living in Seoul who are not with the American forces, and most of them are in the import-export business. Some are employed by Israeli firms such as Koor, Zim, and Tadiran. There are also some Jewish academics who stay for periods of from three months to two years studying or teaching Asian cultures and languages. The Asian-Pacific Jewish Association, founded in 1980 by leaders of the Australian Jewish community, has done much "to overcome the tyranny of distance" and cement relations between Jewish communities of the Pacific region. Korean Jewry is a member of APJA, along with the communities of Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Taiwan, and Thailand. The organization also publishes the *Asian-Pacific Survival Guide for the Jewish Traveller* and promotes scholarly conferences between Jewish and Asian academics.¹⁶

South Korea and the State of Israel

Diplomatic Relations. South Korea and Israel have much in common. Both nations achieved political independence soon after World War II, and then found themselves engaged in a shooting war and a war of attrition. Thus both had to build a state and a working economy while maintaining a strong army. And, over forty years later, it is clear that both succeeded. Also, Israel and Korea share a keen interest in educating their citizens. The numerous educational institutions and high achievement levels in the two countries attest to this. According to an expert on Asian business, there are more Ph.D.'s per capita in Korea than anywhere else in the world.¹⁷

Despite these commonalities, South Korea and Israel have maintained only superficial contacts. Indeed, from 1978 to 1993 relations were very limited. In 1949, after the Communist victory in the Chinese civil war, Israel recognized the newly established People's Republic of China in the hope—futile, as it turned out—that this would lead to diplomatic relations. Since Communist China aided North Korea in its war against the south, the government in Seoul was extremely cool toward the Jewish state. Israel recognized South Korea in 1962 and established an embassy there two years later. Although South Korea formally recognized Israel, for years it did not establish an embassy there, but was represented by a nonresident ambassador based in Rome. Seeking to improve relations, Israel sent technical experts to South Korea in the 1950s and 1960s to share agricultural information. Two groups, KIFA (Korea-Israel Friendship Association) and the Shalom Club, made up of military and political personalities as well as students, organize yearly receptions on Israel Independence Day and serve as goodwill ambassadors for Israel to the Korean public.¹⁸

In the 1970s, South Korea adopted an increasingly pro-Arab posture, recognizing the PLO in 1973. Israel closed its embassy in Seoul in 1978 and asked that Koreans handle their diplomatic business with Israel through the Israeli embassy in Japan. While the official reason given for this was budgetary, knowledgeable observers believe that it was a response to

Korea's compliance with the Arab economic boycott of Israel. The Koreans, for their part, saw this as a calculated insult. Long hostile to Japan because of centuries of mistreatment and continuing discrimination against Koreans in Japan, Korea took the request to route their business with Israel through Tokyo as an affront to their independence and dignity. Unaware at the time of such Korean sensibilities, the Israelis now recognize that they should have chosen Singapore or even Washington instead of Japan. Then, during the 1980s, when Israel sought to reopen its embassy in Seoul, the South Korean government refused, citing the upcoming 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul as the official reason. The South Korean government stated that it did not want to risk political controversy with Arab nations that might mar the games. But even when the games were concluded South Korea continued to drag its feet on the establishment of an embassy.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the situation gradually improved. Cultural and educational contacts between the two countries increased, and in 1990 Israel and South Korea signed a scientific exchange agreement. In December 1991 South Korea approved an Israeli consulate in Seoul, which was finally upgraded to an embassy in mid-1992. A formal "friendship" dinner with over 100 in attendance marked the event, followed by the official dedication of the new office, complete with the fixing of a mezuzah to the door. Soon after his arrival, Israeli ambassador Asher Naim started lessons in the Korean language with the help of a Jewish graduate student from UCLA who was completing doctoral work in Korean and Jewish intellectual history.²⁰ An Israeli government press release called the new embassy the sign of "a new era" in relations between the two countries and foresaw "great potential for bilateral economic relations" since Israel and Korea both were "rapidly growing industrialized nations characterized by complementary high-technology economies." The press release noted that a delegation headed by the chairman of the Korean importers association had recently visited Israel, and that trade between the two nations had increased by 30 percent from 1990 to 1991.²¹

Establishment of the embassy has had a major impact. The Israeli ambassador is a frequent guest at public gatherings. He has been particularly welcomed by the Christian population, 9,000 of whom visited Israel in 1992. Since the opening of the embassy, the foreign ministers of the two countries have held two meetings, one in Vienna and the other in New York, and have plans to visit each other's country.

On December 22, 1993, South Korea opened its first embassy in Israel. It is presently headed by a chargé d'affaires, but an ambassador will be appointed sometime in 1994.

South Korea and the Arab Boycott. Since South Korea is dependent on foreign oil, sells to Arab markets, and participates in construction projects in the Middle East, it has been extremely reluctant to antagonize any Arab nation. It therefore went along with the Arab economic boycott of Israel instituted by the Arab League in 1946, two years before the State of Israel was born. Typical of Korean responses to Israeli overtures was the October 24, 1991, memo from J. B. Lee, Korean Air's general manager of passenger marketing for Europe. Indicating the company's decision not to operate in Israel for the time being, he noted: "This decision was made after deep consideration of our market situation and the surrounding political situation."²²

Nevertheless, there are South Korean companies that trade with Israel secretly. This

practice is reflected in an April 3, 1992, memo from Min Park of Samsung Electronics about the possible sale of work stations to Israel: "I have talked with my boss and associates about potential business relationship with you. Everything went fine but we faced the Arab boycott rule. Unfortunately, we could not export our products directly to you. We want to do some business with you very much, but to do this, you should need a party (agent) which would manipulate the business for you."²³

Such covert business arrangements are quite common in East Asia, where traders take great pains to get around political controversies that might interfere with the business of making money. Many nations that do not maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan, for example, maintain trade offices in Taipei, and these offices often provide the diplomatic services ordinarily available from formal embassies and consulates. For years, goods were traded between Taiwan and mainland China through Hong Kong, where the original manufacturing labels were changed. Similarly, South Koreans do not want trade with the Middle East bogged down in politics, and therefore pursue what one academic calls a "utilitarian trade policy."²⁴

Koreans express additional reasons for caution. Having lived through a long period of domination by Japan, and then having seen Korea divided by the cold war, South Korea views itself as a small and vulnerable state, geographically distant from most of the world and dependent on foreigners—the great majority of them Arab producers—for oil to build its industrial base. In addition, South Korean construction companies have sought to develop positive relationships with the Arab world in order to obtain lucrative contracts there. Also important was South Korea's eagerness to be admitted to the UN, which led it to seek positive relations with as many member nations as possible. And, as mentioned earlier, South Korea, the host of the 1988 Olympics, did not want political feuds to mar the games.²⁵

Israel, however, has long sought to induce South Korea to make a public break from the Arab boycott. Israel's supporters in the United States and American Jewish organizations have been quite active in this area. The American Jewish Committee, for example, through its Pacific Rim Institute, has held numerous meetings with Korean officials, business leaders, and academics in an ongoing effort to end Korean compliance with the boycott.²⁶ American public officials have sought the same goal. Members of Congress have written, both individually and in concert, to the president of South Korea asking for a reevaluation of its policy. A letter dated November 7, 1991, to President Roh Tae Woo, signed by over seventy members of Congress, noted that compliance with the boycott violated the very principle of free trade that South Korea officially espouses.

By 1991, things began to change. The Seoul Olympics were over, and South Korea had been admitted to the UN. A world oil glut had brought down prices and made oil-poor nations less dependent on the Arabs. The cold war had ended, encouraging a general international atmosphere of greater diplomatic and economic openness. And the beginning of Arab-Israeli peace talks in October 1991 signaled that at least some Arab states were willing to consider the possibility of a rapprochement with the Jewish state. South Korea subtly shifted its policy toward Israel. In December of that year, soon after an AJC delegation arranged by Dr. Neil Sandberg discussed the matter with the country's foreign minister in Seoul, South Korea not only voted for but also cosponsored the UN resolution repealing the infamous "Zionism is racism" resolution.²⁷

Since then, there has been a noticeable lessening of South Korean compliance with the boycott, and Korean-Israeli trade has not only increased but is much more visible. Dacom, a major telecommunications company, has signed an agreement with the Israeli firm Bezek for two-way transmission of voice, picture, and computer data between the two countries. By opening up such direct communication, this deal will undoubtedly lead to more contacts between Israel and South Korea. Similarly, Hyundai Industries, one of South Korea's largest industrial concerns, for the first time bid for and won—against a dozen, mostly European, competitors—a contract to build a \$70 million power plant for the Dead Sea Works. The firm also agreed to purchase, over a ten-year period, large quantities of Israeli potash, ferrous magnesium, and salt.²⁸ A number of large Korean corporations—including Hyundai, Samsung, Goldstar, and Daewoo—have sent delegations to Israel. The Korean minister of science and technology, accompanied by presidents of important scientific institutions, visited Israel, resulting in several R&D and joint venture agreements. The director generals of the two foreign ministries have held economic and political consultations in Jerusalem, agreeing to open negotiations for trade, scientific, cultural, and aviation agreements.

Another inducement for South Korea and other East Asian nations to repudiate the boycott is a 1992 law enacted by the State of California that bars the investment of state funds in companies that boycott Israel. A similar enactment on a smaller scale is a municipal ordinance in Los Angeles denying city contracts to firms that cooperate with the boycott. Since an estimated 60 percent of U.S.-Asian trade passes through California, East Asian businesses may now find it even more in their interest to establish economic ties with Israel.²⁹

Korean Americans and Jewish Americans

Koreans in America. Substantial Korean immigration to the United States began with the enactment of the liberal immigration law of 1965. Though the immigrants tended to settle in the big cities on both coasts, much of the literature on Korean Americans focuses on “Koreatown” in Los Angeles—which the Los Angeles-based *Korea Times* has called the “symbolic center” of Korean American life—where many Korean immigrants and their families live and/or work within 100 city blocks. They have developed several outreach organizations, including the Korean American Coalition, the Korean American Bar Association, the Korean American Chamber of Commerce, and the Southern California Korean College Student Association.³⁰

Scholars have noted two characteristics of the Korean American community that are common to American Jews as well. For one thing, Korean Americans are concerned about retaining their language and culture, and some have even begun to look to the Jewish community as a model of how to integrate the best of modern American life with traditional values.³¹ Also, many Korean Americans have become involved in wholesale and retail businesses. CNN recently reported that 10 percent of Koreans in Los Angeles own businesses, and the Korean American Grocers Association has been formed as a local and national lobbying group to represent their interests. According to an article in *U.S. News & World Report*, “Koreans have replaced Jews as the dominant shopkeeper class” in the Los Angeles area.³²

Despite these commonalities, despite the fact that Jewish and Korean Americans live

near each other in New York, Los Angeles, and other urban centers, and despite the generally positive nature of the interactions between Korean and Jewish individuals, it is only recently that Jewish American and Korean American groups or organizations have established regular relationships. In the late 1980s, a group of young Jewish professionals in New York City began to hold monthly meetings with Asian Americans to discuss common concerns, and a Jewish community center in nearby Tenafly, New Jersey, held an opening night reception for an exhibit of Jewish and Korean art. In 1991, a Los Angeles synagogue hosted Korean Americans at its communal Passover seder. And the next year, a Jewish studies professor at Colgate University in upstate New York organized a Shabbat dinner featuring a speaker on the Jews of East Asia. About eighty Jewish and Asian American students attended.³³

The Israeli consulate in New York City encourages ties between American Jews and Koreans, seeing them as a bridge between Korea and Israel. "If there is something important to do for Israel, it's to make people aware of the growing importance of the Pacific Rim for Israel and for the Jewish community," explained Sarah Bar-Or, who served for two years as Israel's consul for community affairs in New York.³⁴

The Jewish organization most active in building bridges with Asians and Asian Americans has been the American Jewish Committee. Having sent a number of delegations to East Asia to confer with diplomats and business leaders, it recognized the need for an ongoing program, and established the Pacific Rim Institute under the direction of Bruce M. Ramer and Dr. Neil Sandberg. The Institute—which so far has developed programming with Japan, Korea, and China—networks with other groups in Asia and the United States that are interested in U.S.-Asia relations, serves as a resource to the mass media, engages in public education projects, and seeks to improve intergroup relations. In its contacts with representatives of East Asian countries, it has asserted the justice of Israel's case, especially against the Arab economic boycott.³⁵

Institute director Sandberg first visited Korea in September 1989. Besides Korean leaders, he met with Israel's ambassador to South Korea and Japan, Nahum Eshkol. Sandberg learned that anti-Semitism existed in the country but was confined mainly to old stereotypes about Jews and money; that economic and political relations between Israel and South Korea were beginning to improve; and that both the government and private institutions in the country would welcome Pacific Rim Institute projects.³⁶

Dr. Sandberg returned to Korea in May 1990, and again met with Korean leaders. This time, he concentrated on two matters: convincing the Korean government of the importance to world Jewry of the reopening of the Israeli embassy in Seoul, and developing plans for a scholarly symposium in the United States on the Jewish and Korean diasporas. The conference took place on January 29, 1991, in Los Angeles. The program, which focused on the similarities and differences between the two cultures, featured papers and commentary by both Jewish and Korean scholars. Joining the AJC in sponsoring the event were the Korea Society, the Asian Institute for Public Policy, and Kon-Kuk University, which is based in Korea. The *Korea Times* called the symposium "a historic first."³⁷

In December 1991, a delegation from the AJC and its Pacific Rim Institute traveled to South Korea to discuss the reopening of the Israeli embassy, Korean compliance with the Arab boycott, and the drive to rescind the UN resolution identifying Zionism with racism.

Members of the delegation included David A. Harris, the AJC's executive director, who provided a clear explanation of the importance of these issues to government officials, industrial leaders, and academics.³⁸

The second symposium on Korean-Jewish relations cosponsored by the AJC took place in May 1992, with American participants going to Kon-Kuk University. More than 200 Koreans attended, including professors, students, and journalists. Also present were two Israeli scholars and the chargé d'affaires of the Israeli embassy. Dr. Sandberg delivered an address on possibilities for future cooperation that was later published in Korean. Both symposia cleared up misconceptions that participants on each side had about the other. One Korean professor, for example, who was familiar with Christianity but not Judaism, had considered the Jewish religion an earlier form of Christianity, and was unaware, till the symposium, that there were definite historical and theological differences between the two religions.³⁹

In 1992, the AJC's Pacific Rim Institute, in cooperation with Korean Television Enterprises in Los Angeles, produced a program about organized Jewish life that was broadcast in early 1993. There are plans to have the city's Jewish Television Network produce a similar program on the Korean community.⁴⁰

The Common Agenda. Both Jewish and Korean American organizations in Los Angeles have become increasingly alarmed about the proliferation of hate speech on talk radio and in rap music lyrics and the general decline in ethnic relations that has occurred over the last decade. In the early 1990s, the two groups instituted formal cooperation to combat these expressions of bigotry, issuing joint protests against anti-Jewish and anti-Korean music albums.⁴¹ When the 1992 Los Angeles riots resulted in the deaths of several Korean Americans and the loss of millions of dollars, Jewish groups reached out.⁴² The American Jewish Committee's Los Angeles chapter donated funds to help the injured community organize itself. AJC also met with local Korean American leaders to share the insights gained from years of experience promoting group interests in a multiethnic society. And the AJC brought the Koreans together with local black organizations in the hope of getting the two groups to empathize with each other's concerns. Recognizing the importance of Korean-Jewish ties, Jerry Yu of the Korean American Coalition met with representatives of the AJC and other Jewish groups in the weeks and months after the riots to discuss what the two communities could learn from each other and how they might develop political alliances.⁴³

Another issue on the agenda of Jews and Koreans is how Jews are perceived in Korea. As noted above, many Koreans see Jews through the perspective of Christianity. On the one hand, this encourages the identification of Jews with positive images from the Hebrew Bible. But there is a darker side. Alluding to Christian anti-Semitism, a Korean American writer noted in 1988: "At the root of Korean anti-Semitism, one may detect bits of the 'You crucified Him' syndrome."⁴⁴ A second negative stereotype, also noted earlier, is the notion of Jewish financial control over the world, which got its start when banker Jacob Schiff gave invaluable help to Japan in the Russo-Japanese War.

Anti-Semitic publications, most notoriously the books of Masami Uno, which have been sold for some time in Japan, have been translated into Korean and are now available in Seoul. Indeed, Uno himself has lectured on anti-Semitic themes in South Korea.⁴⁵ In March

1993, a native speaker of the Korean language conducted an informal, unscientific survey of books on Jews and Israel that were on sale in Seoul bookstores. About 80 percent of the material is not anti-Semitic. There are books that portray Jews positively, emphasizing the strong family ties, reverence for tradition, and emphasis on education that characterize Jewish life, and Israel's "winning spirit" that has enabled it to prevail in its wars. There are also books written in a neutral tone about the Bible, Jewish history, the Hebrew language, and the Holocaust. About 20 percent of the books cast the Jewish people and/or the State of Israel in a negative light, depicting Israel as the aggressor in the Middle East and alleging that Jews control the world. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is sold on the streets of Seoul.⁴⁶

Interestingly, Korean dictionaries help perpetuate stereotypes about Jews. One dictionary, for example, *Minjungseorim's Essence English-Korean Dictionary*, defines Jews first as "Hebrews, people who believe in Judaism," but then goes on to list allegedly "Jewish" traits: "doesn't spend money, but collects money . . . causes trouble, arguments, and fights . . . charges high interest rates . . . is unbelieving . . . and doesn't trust others." Several slang phrases are also included: "go to the Jews," explained as "borrowing money at high interest rates," to "jew down," explained as bargaining down the price, and "rich as a Jew," explained as a tricky and manipulative millionaire. Unfortunately, many Korean speakers, both in Korea and abroad, gain their first impressions of the Jewish people from this dictionary.

Today, the idea of Jewish domination has a new wrinkle, the outrageous claim that Jews control the mass media. In August 1992, this author attended the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). Thirty Korean professors—members of the Korean Communications Association—discussed this issue with me, and many of them were convinced that the Jewish-controlled media took specific actions to promote the interests of Israel and the international Jewish community. And they said that they were first exposed to this idea while studying for their doctorates at American universities. Indeed, this "Jewish conspiracy" was espoused at the convention by North Korea's deputy permanent representative to the UN, Ho Jung, who blamed North Korea's negative media image on "Jewish influence." Dismissing legitimate substantive criticism of his regime, this diplomat blamed "the ethnic factor" in the American press—alleged Jewish power—for libeling his country.

North Korea

The danger that North Korea poses for Jewish interests goes beyond the propagation of false charges of Jewish influence. The communist northern state is an international pariah, and its stagnant economy—with a per capita income below \$1,000—is in sharp contrast with the prosperity of the South, where the per capita income is more than five times higher.⁴⁷ Its normal trading opportunities inhibited, North Korea has concentrated increasingly on the international arms trade. It deals extensively with Israel's long-term enemies—Iran, Syria, and Libya.

In 1992 and 1993, five Israeli military delegations visited North Korea, and experts believe that the Iranians are interested in the progress of North Korea's nuclear research. A senior military analyst in Tel Aviv has stated that "North Korea has become the major proliferator of ballistic missiles to the Middle East." The Scud-C missiles available from the North Koreans are more accurate and have a greater range than the Scud-B type used by Iraq

in the Gulf War. They have recently been delivered to Iran and Syria, and may alter the strategic balance in the region. Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres called the sales “a renewal of the arms race.”⁴⁸

The threat posed by North Korea’s international arms shipments has brought Israel and South Korea closer together. Senior South Korean officials visited Israel in April 1993, and the following month David Ivri, director-general of the Israeli Military Defense, traveled to Seoul to meet with high-level South Koreans. Military analysts speculate that these visits were aimed at enhancing intelligence cooperation between the two states. According to some reports, the South Koreans are especially interested in learning more about the Israeli air strike in June 1981 that crippled Iraq’s nuclear reactor.

Israel has made overtures to the North Koreans. In November 1992, a *New York Times* reporter wrote that Eitan Ben-Tzur, the deputy director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, had made a “secret journey” to Pyongyang, North Korea’s capital, to discuss Scud sales to Israel’s adversaries. Over the next several months, Israeli and North Korean officials held meetings in Pyongyang and Beijing. Even while negotiating with Israel, North Korea continued to send missiles to the Middle East. Mr. Ben-Tzur met with senior North Korean diplomats in a final meeting in Beijing in July 1993.

Israel was especially concerned about the proposed sale to Iran of Rodong-1 missiles, which could hit Tel Aviv when fired from Teheran. Israel offered financial inducement in an attempt to dissuade North Korea from going ahead with the sale. When the North Koreans asked for \$500 million in three months, Israel countered with with an offer of \$25 million, payable directly to the government officials involved. This was rejected.

Rebuffed, Israel announced in August 1993 that it was suspending contacts with North Korea “to enable the United States to take action.” The United States shares Israel’s concern about North Korea’s efforts to attain a nuclear capacity and its international arms sales, especially the plans to help Iran, Syria, and Libya set up their own missile plants. “It’s the indigenous production capability that’s the real problem,” according to Timothy McCarthy of the Program for Non-Proliferation Studies. “Once these countries get it, the horse is out of the barn.”⁴⁹

The Clinton administration has promised Israel that it will seek an end to North Korea’s sale of surface-to-surface missiles to the Middle East as part of the U.S. battle against the North Korean nuclear program. In October 1993, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on direct talks between the United States—privately backed by South Korea—and North Korea. The Americans, eager to persuade the North Koreans to abandon their nuclear weapons program and open their nuclear facilities to international inspection, are offering a formal peace treaty ending the Korean War, diplomatic recognition, and a lifting of economic sanctions.⁵⁰

The threat to peace posed by North Korea’s arms trade and its nuclear potential is recognized by the world community, especially Japan and other Pacific Rim nations. Moreover, UN officials fear that North Korea might withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. South Korea and Israel, with the most to lose, are especially concerned.

The Future of Korean-Jewish Relations

On his 1992 lecture tour in Korea, Chaim Potok described his fiction: "I am writing about individuals who grow up inside the center of their own culture and encounter elements from the center of another culture. The people I write about encounter Freud, art, Marxism, the world of Asia—confrontation at the centers of culture." Of the future, Rabbi Potok stated: "Confrontation, clashes of culture, is what most people on this planet experience today. It is not going away. This is the future of our species."⁵¹

Koreans, Israelis, and American Jews will surely be part of that confrontation.

Notes

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15. Chaim Potok, *The Book of Lights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 257; interview with Rabbi Kenneth Zisook, U.S. Army chaplain in Seoul, Apr. 6, 1990.

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17. Interview with Christopher Engholm, consultant on doing business in East Asia, Mar. 12, 1993.

18. Telephone interview with Gerry Stoch, consul for economic affairs at the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles, Jan. 4, 1993.

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