



Zakriya with Sarah Cohen

The Hebrew Calligrapher of Cochin

An Indian Muslim's love for language

I can recall much of my first visit to the Cochin Jewish Synagogue, which is where I first found a love for the beauty of Hebrew calligraphy. It was years ago when I was a small boy, about 10 years old. I can't explain why, but I had been insisting that my father take me to the synagogue. I don't know what the driving force was. While some might say it was something divine for a 10 year-old boy. Perhaps it was just to satisfy my curiosity about what drove so many foreigners to visit my town of Cochin, India.

It was evening, around 6.30pm. The roads leading to Jew Town had begun to be painted in darkness of the night. There were no other people in the street. I think it was a Sunday. The growing curiosity to see this place made each second seem like an hour. At last I reached the quiet of Jew Town junction where the yellowish tint of the streetlight gave the place a distinct look from the other streets of Cochin.

My father parked his bike to one side and we walked. The buildings on both

sides of the street seemed to me to be extraordinarily large; the antique shops in the street grabbed my attention. At the synagogue, two unusual lamps stood on either side of the synagogue's gate and the seemingly random laid rocks in front took me decades back. Even today it feels that I am somewhere back in history when I visit Jew Town.

The gatekeeper told my father that the synagogue was closed to visitors during that time. Someone from the

Feature

by Thoufeek Zakriya

synagogue who was lighting the lamp came out. I am sure he was a Jew. He was fair with cat-like eyes and wore a skull cap. My father explained to him how I had insisted that he take me to the synagogue. With a warm smile, he allowed me and my father to go inside. The panoramic view is still fresh in my mind. I can even sketch it out. I paid the most attention to the Hebrew. I noticed the wall writings and the Arc which was carved out exquisitely.

This incident was significant. I can still see the Hebrew letters all around me.

My curiosity for all languages grew. I loved to write Hindi and Gujrathi in my 9th year in school. Later, in the 10th standard I was crazy for Chinese characters. I used the characters to create a secret code language for my classmates. It's still there in my slam book. My calligraphy expanded to include Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Syrian, Samaritan and English.

For higher secondary school I went to

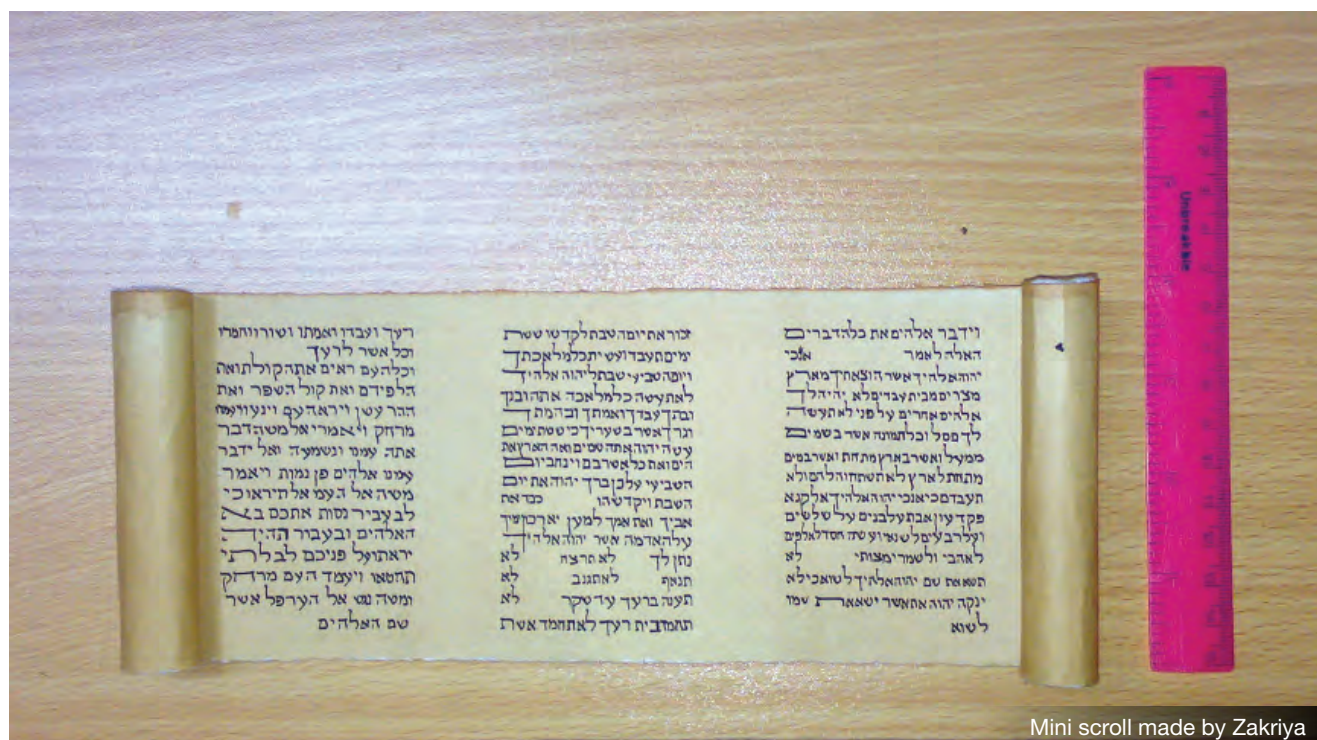
a school run by Catholics. The school gave me a Gideon's Bible. I took it home and started to turn the pages. There was one page that had a translation of a verse from John in around 25 different languages, including Arabic, Hebrew and German. The Hebrew immediately attracted me. A long time had passed since I had visited the synagogue but this was another moment which helped me connect with Hebrew. I started to learn more and began to imitate the letters. This started my journey with the Hebrew language, already imprinted in my mind.

I wanted to get a copy of a Hebrew Bible for myself to learn from. I purchased a Hebrew book from a street-side bookseller. While it was not a Bible, but rather a daily prayer book, it was a start. That book helped me because one side was Hebrew and other side was its English translation. On the last page there was transliteration of Kaddish Leela (Half Kaddish). This is what actually helped me understand the alphabet and vowels.

After spending long hours up at night, I learned the letters in the aleph-bet and I later realized that some forms of letters were only used at the ending of words. I compared the Hebrew with the Arabic alphabet that I learned in my childhood. This helped me to better understand the Hebrew language. Gradually I learned to write, read and then to understand some of the meaning of the words.

I used a simple fountain pen, pencils, brushes, a shaped quill, a carved bamboo stick and also a calligraphic pen to write Hebrew. One of my friends, Sharon, who knew about my interest in Hebrew, asked me if I had visited the synagogue of Cochin. I had not been back since that night when I was a young boy.

The next day four of us took off for the synagogue on our bicycles. Inside, the synagogue was cool as it is well ventilated. Suddenly the large doors of the synagogue closed as it was time for the caretaker to close it for the night. An old man with a kippah walked along with



Mini scroll made by Zakriya

a lady while explaining the history of the synagogue. The old man opened the Aron Kodesh and showed her the Torah scroll. I looked at the letters and began to pick out words I knew. The old man looked at me with surprise and asked how I learned to read Hebrew.

“Are you a Jew?” he asked me.

“No, I am a Muslim,” I replied.


He asked who taught me Hebrew. I explained that I had learned it on my own. I told him my story of my first visit to the synagogue. He asked me if I was able to read from the Torah. I explained that I was only able to read with the vowels but would be willing to try. I read a small portion out loud. This was enough to impress him.

I was amazed at what I had seen. When I got home that evening I tried to make a replica of the scroll I had looked at but knew I would have to learn some of the rules to be followed. My eagerness energized me and I worked hard all week with the knowledge I had. I took it to the caretaker of the synagogue, Mr. Joy, who introduced me to the warden, Samuel Hallegua. I showed him the miniature replica of the Torah that I had created. He took a great interest in speaking with me and invited me to his home.

We talked about Judaism and the life of Jews in Kerala. We talked about the recent reconstruction of the first mosque of India, Cheraman Juma Masjid, which is situated in Kodungalur. He was a great storyteller and believed in peaceful coexistence and tolerance. I frequently

visited him. The last time I saw him, I presented him with an oil painting of a Menorah and a calligraphic piece of the Ten Commandments in Hebrew that I had made for him. He passed away a couple of days before Rosh-Hashanah in September 2009.

Soon after, I met Sarah Cohen, another elderly member of the community. I shared my work with her and she shared a real Cochini Pesach with me during my university break. Sarah aunty explained the Pesach preparations like cleaning the house and stacking the vessels and utensils. Every trip home now I visit with her.

I am not a stranger to the community and the synagogue is now familiar. I am very proud to call Cochin my home. 

LIBERAL JEWISH HIGH HOLIDAY SERVICES COME TO SHANGHAI

Apples and Honey in the Hai!

A new initiative is underway which will offer High Holiday worship services (Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) in the spirit of liberal (Reform) Judaism this year in Shanghai. Join us as we celebrate the New Year with like-minded liberal Jews of all backgrounds. Children and non-Jewish partners are very welcome and all activities are free. Pick and choose from a variety of experiences and activities. Services will be conducted by Rabbi Joel Oseran, Vice President, International Development, for the World Union for Progressive Judaism. Rabbi Oseran lives with his family in Israel and develops and strengthens Progressive congregations in emerging communities in Central and Eastern Europe, the Former Soviet Union and other parts of the world. He has traveled extensively in Asia and knows the liberal Jewish communities in Beijing, Singapore and has served as Rabbi for the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong during a sabbatical leave.

For a full list of events and location details please email liberaljewsshanghai@gmail.com RSVP required.

