



**Report**  
Asian Progressive Judaism Summit  
Singapore  
January 2019,

**BETWEEN** 24 and 27<sup>th</sup> January the 2nd Asian Progressive Judaism Summit took place in Singapore, sharing ideas, stories and best practice on The Rise of Judaism in Asia. Rabbis, Ambassadors, Members of Parliament, teachers, lay leaders, monks, Muslims and interested others attended, from more than twenty countries across the region and beyond.

The Summit opened on Thursday evening in the beautifully restored former home of the Singapore Parliament, now known as The Arts House. Delegates were greeted by children from the Hebrew School of the United Hebrew Congregation of Singapore, singing Hatikvah and the National Anthem of Singapore, thus emphasising the dual identity (and the challenge, a point which was raised several times during the panel discussions) the following day) of Jewish communities everywhere: in maintaining their commitment to both the country in which they reside and to their religion.

Opening

### Opening Speakers

Stefanie Green, Chair of the APJ Summit organising committee and UHC Singapore Rabbi Alfred Nathan officially welcomed the delegates to the Summit.

Introductions

First to speak was Frank Lavin, former US Ambassador to Singapore, who explained how Judaism grounds us by providing history and identity. His message, that Judaism also commands us to build bridges between our own and other peoples' identities, was further expounded by the presenters who followed:

Frank Lavin

- Melissa Kwee (CEO of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre)
- Mohamed Irshad (Member of the Singaporean Parliament and founder of Roses of Peace, an organisation which promotes religious harmony) and
- Simona Halperin, the Israeli Ambassador to Singapore

Melissa Kwee  
Mohammad Irshad  
Simona Halperin

They all emphasised the importance of bringing people from different backgrounds together, whether it be different ethnicities or religions, an area where Singapore is a strong positive role model for the world, or from within the Jewish faith, by recognising, especially on the anniversary of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the commonalities which mark us out as Jews, instead of labouring over our differences in ideology.

Bringing people together

Carole Sterling, Chair of the World Union for Progressive Judaism closed the evening's official speeches, by reminding us of our right to a meaningful Jewish experience everywhere in the world and our responsibility to sustain and support one another in this endeavour by

Carole Sterling



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not allowing others to define who is a Jew. This message was echoed by a short video from Angela Buchdahl, the first Asian-American to be ordained as a Rabbi, who was unable to join the Summit in person. After experiencing prejudice as a teenager, from fellow Jews who questioned her right to belong to the faith, Angela believed herself to be the new face of Judaism, realising only later that thousands of years of Jewish life in Asia give the lie to this.

Angela Buchdahl

**Day 1**

This set the scene for seven hours of presentations and panel discussions which took place the following day. As Rabbi Dr Ruth Abusch-Magder from Be'chol Lashon explained, the preconception in America is that all Jewish life stems from nineteenth century immigrants on the Lower East Side who fled persecution in Eastern Europe. The prevailing narrative is similar in Europe. But the reality is that 20% of American Jews do not fit that mould, as conversion, children from mixed marriages and adoption breed individuals who are both Jewish and other.

Ruth Abusch-Magder

Yet another group, as Angela Buchdahl discovered, have been Asian and Jewish for millennia. Representatives of communities in India, Myanmar, and Indonesia shared their incredible stories of Jewish migration throughout the region from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple on, as a result of trade, sea faring and persecution.

In Myanmar, the Jewish cemetery has over 700 graves, mostly Baghdadi Jews from the Middle East and Cochin and Bene Israel Jews from India. Fewer than 20 Jews remain today, nevertheless, Sammy Samuels, the leader of the community still lovingly maintain's Yangon's only synagogue. "In New York, who cares if you go to synagogue" he asks, with a smile. "But in Yangon, if I do not go, no one will open the gates"

Jews of Myanmar

Delegates also heard personal stories from Charlotte Leong, a Jewish Asian teenager from Hong Kong, who described the alienating feeling of finding no cultural references on which to anchor herself, there being very few Jewish or Asian personalities in literature or film and none at all who combine the two, and from Souks Soukhaseum, a refugee from Laos turned Orthodox Jew who brings Buddhist elements to his new faith through adaptations such as fried rice cakes instead of latkes for Chanukah.

Charlotte Leong of  
Hong Kong



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How individuals view their attachment to Judaism is far more important than historical or genetic fact, explained Rabbi Professor Seth Kunin, expanding the term “Crypto Judaism” beyond its common frame of reference to the forced conversion of Spanish Jews during the Middle Ages to cover all those who want to reclaim their Jewish identity. This has been a catalyst for the development of many progressive communities across Asia, where individuals felt simultaneously excluded by Orthodox practices but compelled to celebrate their own Judaism. The URJ (now JCC) in Mumbai, the UJC in Hong Kong, the UHC in Singapore, the Kehilat Shanghai, the Kehilat B’nei Hof Bali and the Hakehillah in Seoul all trace their inception in this way.

Seth Kunin

As the participants rolled through the topics of the day: “The History of Asian Progressive Judaism”, “Returning to Judaism”, “I’m Jewish and I’m Asian” and “Building Jewish Life in Asia”, many common themes and tensions emerged: history versus continuity, inclusion versus differentiation, religion versus politics, how people see themselves versus how the world sees them. Asian Jewry has no blueprint, no single ethnic root, its demographics are often diverse and transient, it may even, as Rabbi Nathan Alfred later posited in his Friday evening Shabbat sermon to more than two hundred congregants, delegates and guests, not exist as a discrete entity at all. Yet all Jewish communities ultimately need the same things: inspiring Rabbis, a strong lay leadership, youth programmes to enable our children to continue the story and, of course, food, especially those traditionally associated with the festivals. What is our best way forward: to exactly replicate Progressive Jewish communities around the world, in the manner of Chabad, or to develop local solutions to meet the needs of diverse groups?

Common themes  
and tensions

Through all the hours and words one thing is clear. We Jews, as both Moses and God observed at the giving of the Ten Commandments, are a stiff-necked people. We frequently refuse to bend our necks towards each other, or even towards God. But faced with a threat to our Judaism, however we might choose, individually, to define that Jewishness, our stiff necks manifest themselves as the utmost loyalty. As Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum, who died in the Warsaw Ghetto, observed: “This is a people awesome in its obstinacy”. And therein lies the greatest hope for the future of Asian Jewry and for Jews everywhere.

After the close of the official Summit programme, UHC members and delegates continued to discuss, debate, daven and dance through Friday night and Saturday morning Shabbat services, a gala dinner to

Closing, gala dinner,  
Shabbat events, and  
food.



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celebrate 25 years of UHC and leadership and Hebrew School events. In particular, the Shabbat morning service on January 26th, held at the home of Harvey and Rosita Goldstein, was a special event in its own right. The volume and diversity of Jewish voices joined in prayer was mirrored by the volume and diversity of kosher dishes emerging from Rosita's kitchen for the communal Kiddush and lunch. The traditional Jewish favourites and regional specialities uniting and delighting on the dinner plate were a fitting metaphor for the Summit as a whole. Indonesian Nasi Tumpeng (cone rice), beef and vegetable kreplach, stuffed cabbage, chicken satay, spiced crispy tempeh, savoury potato pancakes, Israeli couscous salad, steamed vegetables with spiced coconut dressing, even a whole baked salmon, not to mention a variety of desserts, ensured that UHC members and their guests from around the world experienced both physical and spiritual fulfilment on this meaningful Singaporean Shabbat.

**Report written by Rosalind Arwas**