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Fifteen members of the Israeli Artists Group of Toronto are set for their second annual art show at J.E.H./Thoreau MacDonald House north of Toronto beginning May 13 and running till May 16.

More Israeli artists show their wares at 4-day annual event

Shlomo Kapustin
Correspondent

TORONTO – The Israeli Artists Group of Toronto is ramping up for its second annual art show, scheduled to coincide with Yom Yerushalayim, or Jerusalem Day. It will run from May 13 to May 16 and take place at the J.E.H./Thoreau MacDonald House, just north of Toronto.

“We wanted to expand, so that the community knows more about us,” said Moshe Mikanovsky, one of the organizers of the event. “Obviously, we want to sell, but it’s also about culture.”

Twenty-four artists will be showing their art at the free, four-day event, a 50 per cent increase from last year’s 16 exhibitors, and Mikanovsky, whose work includes some Jewish- and Israeli-themed work, said that the group is already looking for larger quarters for next year’s exhibit.

The group’s ranks have swelled in the past year to reach

about 35, said Mira Clarfield, who recently stepped down as one of its official leaders. Along with the growth in numbers has come greater exposure for the group’s members.

Founded in 1992, the group comprises members of many artistic disciplines – from jewellery to painting to ceramics to photography to sculpture to calligraphy to textiles. Some artists create Judaica; some focus on secular materials. Many work at other full-time occupations; about a third are full-time artists.

While some of the newer recruits are working to increase the group’s exposure, the organization mostly serves as an artistic support group of sorts for Israeli ex-pats.

“It’s to be able to see and hear each other and share intimate feelings,” said Meni Conen, a veteran of the organization who headed it for about five years in the 1990s. “We are ... supporting each other and helping each other.”

Once a month, for example, the group meets and, in addition to the social component, invites a guest to speak about an art-related topic. A few weeks ago, Avner Levona, the husband of group member Aliza Levona, screened two short films that he had directed – one, a whimsical take on falafel; the other, a history of the classic hora folk dance – and discussed their creation.

Conen, whose artist-appropriate Hebrew name is translated as “create,” pointed out that many artists work alone, “so you learn by being with other artists together. Everyone has their own style, but they do it together.”

Hours for the show are: May 13 from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.; May 14 from Noon to 9 p.m.; May 15-16 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The site of the show, the J.E.H./Thoreau MacDonald House, is located at 121 Centre Street in Thornhill, Ontario, close to the Yonge-Centre intersection.

Kaifeng undergoing unusual Jewish revival

Atara Beck
Staff Writer

TORONTO – The ancient Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, is experiencing an unusual revival, with many people interested in learning about their heritage.

Shi Lei, a descendant of one of the original Jewish families of Kaifeng and a Chinese national tour guide, will speak in Toronto this month to raise awareness of his community.

The event, co-sponsored by Congregation Darchei Noam and the Canadian Jewish Asian Association, will be held on May 13, 7:30 p.m. (doors open at 7), 864 Sheppard Ave. West.

Shi Lei, 32, a graduate of Henan University, studied Jewish history and religion at Bar-Ilan University, near Tel Aviv, followed by studies at Machon Meir Yeshiva in Jerusalem.

The Kaifeng Jewish community hails from Persia and observes Sephardic tradition, he told the *Jewish Tribune* in an interview. For instance, the Torah case they use looks like a cylinder.

Separated from the rest of the Jewish world for hundreds of years, they were discovered by a Jesuit priest in 1605.

“In ancient China, this community had everything. It was top. But after the Torah readings were abandoned – the synagogue was destroyed around 1850 and it was never rebuilt – the community became Chinese. They were so involved in Chinese classical readings instead of Torah and became [Jewishly] ignorant. I am the first Kaifeng Jew ever sent to study Judaism in Israel. So I began to teach the community.”

The last Kaifeng rabbi passed away in 1810 and the community today numbers approximately 300. Upon his return from Israel



Shi Lei, a descendant of original Jewish families of Kaifeng.

to his native city, Shi Lei wanted to share his knowledge and brought back a printed Torah.

“In my great grandfather’s generation, they still observed Pesach, but in a very simple way,” he said. “They cooked unleavened cakes. My grandfather, when he was alive, was probably the only Jew in the Kaifeng community that could relate his childhood memories of Jewish celebrations to Westerners.”

Most of the original Jewish immigrants to Kaifeng were men, and they intermarried with Chinese women who underwent conversion according to *halacha* (orthodox Jewish law).

“It’s really a long story,” he said. “So many people I have met in Israel and in America were very surprised and even shocked. They had never heard of Chinese Jews in Kaifeng.”

“It’s a relatively small city today,” he added. “A thousand years ago it

was China’s capital.”

Since their Jewish lineage had been passed through the father over many generations, they are not currently recognized as Jews according to *halacha*, which requires matrilineal descent or conversion.

“This Kaifeng community is known as the exotic community,” Shi Lei, who attended yeshiva “as a special student of Jewish descent,” said. “We don’t actually go through any kosher conversion. It’s in our blood. I debated with some of the orthodox Jews. We pass our traditions patrilineally in China. We have a strong desire to recover our Jewish heritage.... Some young Jewish descendants might be interested in converting to Orthodox Judaism and going to study in Israel, but not all of us. In the Kaifeng community, every one of us thinks we are really Jewish. For a thousand years we just passed the traditions according to the father. We don’t feel we need to go through a conversion because we consider ourselves Jewish.”

“We passed down tradition orally,” he continued. “We all know we are [originally] from Israel... just words, from generation to generation. We never stopped telling our offspring that we are Jewish and we are from Israel. This keeps us going.”

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