

**JAPANESE STUDIES IN ISRAEL:
A RESPONSE TO MERON MEDZINI'S "FROM ALIENATION TO
PARTNERSHIP: ISRAEL – JAPAN RELATION" IN THE
CONTEMPORARY REVIEW OF THE MIDDLE EAST**

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The two could hardly be more different - Japanese politely obviating any debate; Israelis demonstrating friendship through arguments. But their conversation, which some might have dismissed as globally unimportant, acquires deep meaning. In this regard, the idea to write an article about the relationship between both countries is an interesting one. But in the midst of such conversation one should not develop misconceptions by uninformed research assumptions that do not help to understand the other. An example of such is, unfortunately, Meron Medzini's "From Alienation to Partnership: Israel-Japan Relation" contribution to the *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 5(3) 232–240. This text seeks to clarify its mayor flaws.

Japanese Studies in Israel traces back to the Department of Chinese and Japanese Studies established at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the early 1960s. Due to the popularity of East Asian Studies among Israeli students, it has since expanded to include departments of East Asian Studies at the universities of Tel-Aviv and Haifa, as well as East Asian Studies programs offered by other universities and colleges throughout Israel. I am aware of currently more than 30 professional scholars in Israel whose PhD degree or research focus is in the field of Japanese Studies. Moreover, the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem carries about 10,000 books in Japanese. These numbers are both remarkable given the relatively small size of the country.

Of the three major universities in Israel offering programs in Japanese Studies, each developed its own emphasis: Tel Aviv University, with brilliant scholars on Japanese Buddhism like Erez Joskovich, emphasizes Japanese traditional art, culture, and religion; Haifa University focuses on modern Japanese society and culture; and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem highlights Japanese history and politics, most notably the work of Ben-Ami Shilony, the honorary president of the Israeli Association of Japanese Studies (IAJS).

In February 2012, the IAJS was established at a special symposium at Hebrew University on the 60th anniversary of the establishment of

diplomatic relations between Japan and Israel. It is a cross-university organization made of scholars of Japanese Studies in Israel and is dedicated to the promotion of research and teaching on Japan in Israel. The symposium was titled *Israel and Japan: Regional, Bilateral, and Cultural Perspectives* and consisted of three clusters, one being *Geopolitics and Diplomacy in Japan-Israel relations*. But unfortunately, this cluster did not lead to any significant publications.

Prior to the symposium Daniel Ari Kapner and Stephen Levine's "The Jews of Japan"¹ appeared, which gives a valuable overview of Jewish-Japanese history after David Kranzler's study of the Jewish refugee community of Japanese occupied Shanghai was published in Israel 13 years earlier.² The only significant publications on Japanese-Jewish connections one finds, however, are two books: *The Jews and the Japanese: The Successful Outsiders* by Ben-Ami Shilony,³ in which he compares both groups' interactions with what he sees as the "Christian West," their attempts to integrate into the West, and its repeated rejection of them; and the outstanding study *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype (Studies of Modern Japan)* by David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa.⁴

What makes *Jews in the Japanese Mind* so compelling is the authors' discussion of the Aum Shinrikyo religious cult, which published a vicious 95-page anti-Semitic tract that declared war on the Jews shortly before releasing deadly sarin gas on the Tokyo subway in March 1995. The authors convincingly trace the tragedy back to a century of Japanese antisemitism. Importantly, *Jews in the Japanese Mind* also reveals the truth about various Japanese books, with publications in the millions, that echo the fabricated text *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and blame Jews for the decline of the Japanese Yen or the 1995 Kobe earthquake. The authors also

¹ Daniel Ari Kapner and Stephen Levine, "The Jews of Japan," *Jerusalem Letter* 425/24 Adar I. 5760 (2000).

² David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945* (Hoboken, N.J.: KTAV Pub. House, 1987).

³ Ben-Ami Shilony, *The Jews and the Japanese: The Successful Outsiders* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1992).

⁴ David G. Goodman and Masanori Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype (Studies of Modern Japan)* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

convincingly demonstrate how Japanese attitudes toward Jews have had real political and cultural consequences.

The other text which shaped the image many Japanese have regarding Jews is the Talmud. Interestingly, books (supposedly) dealing with the Talmud have been bestsellers in Japan. The Talmud, or what people believe it to be, was first made popular in Japan by a Rabbi named Marvin Tokayer. I have already written about Tokayer in the context of antisemitism in South Korea which, unfortunately, constitutes a similar case.⁵ Someone looking for a copy of the Talmud in Japan will eventually come across Rabbi Tokayer, as many of the books name him as the author, even having a picture of him inside their front covers.

The first book he published in Japan is entitled *Five Thousand Years of Jewish Wisdom: Secrets of the Talmud Scriptures*. It was written over only three days and has gone through about seventy printings and sold about half a million copies. Tokayer went on to publish more than twenty books on Judaism, mainly for the Japanese market, covering topics such as Jewish education, Jewish humor, or debates around sex dreams in the Talmud.⁶ Many of these books entitled “Talmud” show more cartoons of people in front of churches than text, and for most of these books Hideaki Kasei served as Tokayer’s translator, since he was not able to speak Japanese himself. Shamefully, Kasei is now chairman of the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Facts, which refutes Japanese war crimes during World War II.⁷

Goodman and Miyazawa highlighted Tokayer’s dependency on Kasei in *Jews in the Japanese Mind* very well: “Tokayer cannot read his own work and does not always know what is in it.” With Kasei “speaking through” Tokayer, they argue that Tokayer’s publications lend “credence to the strangest myths and most stubborn stereotypes of Jews in Japan.”⁸ To see how right they are in their observation, one only needs to browse through

⁵ Christopher L. Schilling, “Jewish Seoul: An Analysis of Philo- and Antisemitism in South Korea,” *Modern Judaism* 38/2 (2018): 183–197; Christopher L. Schilling, “Review of *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Japan and the Jews during the Holocaust Era* by Meron Medzini,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 36/3 (2018): 194–204.

⁶ Schilling, “Jewish Seoul,” 4–5.

⁷ Schilling, “Jewish Seoul,” 5; and Schilling, “Review of *Under the Shadow*,” 196.

⁸ Goodman and Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind*, 285.

some of the Tokayer publications, such as, *There Is No Education in Japan: The Jewish Secret of Educating Geniuses*. Tokayer certainly has commercialized Judaism in Japan in order to sell copies while ignoring that it could inflame Jewish myths in probably the last regions of the world that have not yet been infected by the disease of antisemitism.

Medzini, however, calls Tokayer a “pioneer in the study of Japan and the Jews,” and praises him for giving “much-needed advice” to the publication of Medzini’s book *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Japan and the Jews During the Holocaust Era*.⁹ Medzini is an adjunct associate professor of modern Japanese history and Israeli foreign policy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he started teaching modern Japanese history in 1964. He began his teaching career after gaining the position of director of the Israel Government Press Office in Jerusalem from 1962 to 1978. Tellingly, Zev Furst, former political consultant to various Israeli Prime Ministers, called Medzini in the *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* “wrongheaded” and missing fundamental and overriding points of the discussion around Israeli public relations.¹⁰ Among Medzini’s previous publications, one finds “The Chinese Are Coming,” “Hands Across Asia,” and *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun*, which he completed with a scholarship from the Louis Frieberg Center for East Asia Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

I have already written in great detail in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* about the academic sloppiness that led to *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun*. Particularly, the book misunderstands the history of the Holocaust as well as German so-called “reparations” (*Wiedergutmachungszahlungen*), and downplays Japanese war crimes in China. It calls Bulgaria, a country that murdered over thirteen thousand Jews, a “brave nation”¹¹ during the Holocaust for not having murdered more. And it shamefully calls Franco’s Spain a “bright ray in the darkest nightmare.”¹² Moreover, Medzini seems unaware of anti-Semitic writings within Buddhist modernism in Japan, wrongfully claiming “there was nothing that dealt with

⁹ Meron Medzini, *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Japan and the Jews during the Holocaust Era* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Zev Furst, “Responses to Meron Medzini,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 1/3 (2007).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹² *Ibid.*

antisemitism.”¹³ The book also does not mention Ivar Lissner, who had Jewish ancestry and was a Nazi spy in Japan (though he was later arrested by the Japanese). The reader might also wonder why the book’s title calls the Holocaust an “era,” even though it happened shockingly fast just within a couple of years. The book also appeared in an Academic Studies Press series on “Jewish Identities in Post-Modern Society,” though it is clearly not on post-modernism nor on Jewish identities at all.

The book wrongfully claims that, “The concept of genocide was not known to the Japanese. Even the Rape of Nanjing, horrific as it was, was not intended to be, and did not amount to, genocide”¹⁴; and “Even if the Japanese may have sought to impress their wartime allies, they never adopted Germany’s genocidal policies.”¹⁵ It does, however, blame the Americans for “the only 31 Jews killed and approximately 250 wounded in Shanghai [as] the result of an American air raid on Hongkew on July 17th, 1945.”¹⁶

In *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun*, Medzini aims to tell the story of Japanese innocence regarding the fate of the Jewish people during World War II: “The Japanese never built or operated extermination camps and crematoria, nor did they murder Jews because of their race or religion. The idea of genocide against this group of foreigners never crossed their minds”¹⁷; “The Japanese government claimed...that Japan never adopted Nazi-style antisemitism and that it did not take part in the implementation of Hitler’s Final Solution; rather, it tried to behave humanely toward the Jews under its rule”¹⁸; “the historically correct fact that Japan did not go out of its way to harm the forty thousand Jews in its territories”¹⁹; and “Unlike the Germans the Japanese were humane and fair to the Jews. And indeed, the Japanese did not hand over Jews to the Germans as did the French, Dutch, Belgian, Polish, Ukrainian, and other people in Nazi-occupied Europe. From a purely historical perspective, they are right.”²⁰

¹³ Ibid., 137.

¹⁴ Medzini, *Under the Shadow*, 155.

¹⁵ Ibid., 89.

¹⁶ Ibid., 81.

¹⁷ Ibid., vi.

¹⁸ Ibid., vii.

¹⁹ Ibid., 116.

²⁰ Ibid., 148.

Despite the Japanese imprisonment of thousands of Jewish refugees, and later all Jews (but the Russians), in the Shanghai ghetto, his book states that “Most of the Jews, who numbered some 40,000 in all, survived the war and were treated by the Japanese in a somewhat more humane manner than European Jews were by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust.”²¹ In Medzini’s view, thus, Jews should be thankful whenever they are treated in a more humane manner than a Nazi would treat them. He further wrote about the Shanghai ghetto, where 10 percent (about 2,000) of the Jewish inhabitants died due to the miserable living conditions that the Japanese occupiers created for them: “they lived in cramped quarters...but they were not physically molested or harmed.”²²

At one point in the book, Medzini even raises the question “Why did Japan display a relatively tolerant and lenient attitude toward most of the Jews under its control rather than cave into Nazi demands?”²³ Because this is the norm between humans: we normally do not become mass murderers. The right question would have been “Why do some people do these terrible things?” not “How come some people do not give in to the demand of killing millions of innocent people?”

Unfortunately, the author of “From Alienation to Partnership” came up with a highly questionable piece regarding the relation between Japan and the Jewish people. What he wrote about Japan in this piece is mostly trivial, and at times another attempt to whitewash Japanese war crimes during WW2: “Israel had no case for seeking reparations from Japan, although the latter was a member of the Axis Alliance, it did not go out of its way to persecute Jews in the territories it occupied during the war.”²⁴

On the contrary, Israel would have had a case: During WW2 the Japanese forced at first about 20,000 Jewish refugees of occupied Shanghai to live in an area of approximately one square mile in the Hongkew district of town, while the Japanese authorities increasingly stepped up restrictions. Moreover, under Japanese rule the Jews of Penang (today Malaysia) were forced to wear the Star of David with the word “Jew” written on it. But in the words of *Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun*: “Unlike the Germans the

²¹ Ibid., vi.

²² Ibid., 80.

²³ Ibid., 112.

²⁴ Meron Medzini, “From Alienation to Partnership: Israel-Japan Relation,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 5/3 (2018), 234.

Japanese were humane and fair to the Jews”²⁵ and “the attitude of the government and basically the people of Japan towards the persecuted Jews under their control was by and large fair and even humane. At that time this fact was hugely significant and even today it is an event that the Jewish people will not quickly forget.”²⁶

In *From Alienation to Partnership* one reads that “Unlike Europe and America, most Japanese were never aware of the Holocaust, preferring instead to focus on their own Holocaust - the dropping of two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”²⁷ But if one was to talk about a Japanese “Holocaust” or Shoah, one would do well to rather mention the massacres committed by Japanese troops in the occupied territories during WW2, such as the Nanjing Massacre. But Medzini does not agree with the description of them as genocides at all. Scholars like Bradley Campbell²⁸ have described the Nanjing Massacre as a genocide indeed, because it happened in the aftermath of warfare; mass killings continued after the outcome of a battle had been decided. In fact, between 40,000 and 300,000 innocent people of the city of Nanjing were murdered by Japanese troops between December 1937 and January 1938 alone.²⁹ This was not “intended to be genocide”?

Despite authoring an article on Israel-Japan relations, Medzini failed to visit the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in Tokyo’s Azabubai district according to the references of *From Alienation to Partnership*. Overall, the reference list consists of only eleven publications, one from 1928 which does not deal with Israel-Japan relations which started decades later, and one questionable publication from Tokayer and Swartz. Not a single entry from the archives in Tokyo nor Jerusalem, not a single interview conducted, and no mention of scholars such as Goodman, Miyazawa, Kapner, Levine, or Kranzler.

What *From Alienation to Partnership: Israel–Japan Relation* surprisingly does not mention either is the high rate of antisemitism in Japan. According to the Anti-Defamation League 2014 poll, 23 percent of Japanese people were considered anti-Semites. This is more than in India or Estonia,

²⁵ Medzini, *Under the Shadow*, 148.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁷ Medzini, “From Alienation to Partnership,” 235.

²⁸ Bradley Campbell, “Genocide as Social Control,” *Sociological Theory* 27/2 (2009), 154.

²⁹ Schilling, “Review of *Under the Shadow*,” 201.

and about the same as in Argentina with 24 percent. Thirty-four percent of Japanese people hold the opinion Jews would have too much power in the business world, and 32 percent agreed with the statement that “Jews don’t care what happens to anyone but their own kind,” and almost half (46 percent) that “Jews think they are better than other people.”³⁰ Shouldn’t the fact that 28 percent of Japanese people, according to the poll, hold the opinion that “Jews have too much control over global affairs” be mentioned in an article on foreign relations between the Jewish State and Japan?

The article does not mention Japanese-Jewish common ancestry theory either. The number of Japanese people who believe their nation to be a lost tribe of Israel might be very small, but it does play a role in the relations between Israel and Japan when it comes to Japanese tourism and support, even the wish of some Japanese people to make Aliyah (Jewish immigration to Israel).

The article forgets to mention that Chiune Sugihara, who as vice consul in Lithuania helped about six thousand Jews flee the Nazis by issuing transit visas, lost his job as a diplomat because of his rescue mission in post-war Japan, which the article seeks to describe.³¹ And that although Yad Vashem in Israel recognized him as a “Righteous Among the Nations,” for the most part, Japan has not actively promoted knowledge of his efforts.

This article on the history of Israel-Japan relations also fails to mention the Lod Airport Massacre of May 30th 1972, in which three Japanese terrorists attacked Lod Airport (now Ben Gurion International Airport) murdering 26 people, including the renowned protein biophysicist and candidate for the upcoming Israeli presidency election, Professor Aharon Katzir, and injuring 80 others.

Nor does Medzini mention that in 1984, the book *Sekai wo ugokasu yudaya pawah no himitsu* [世界を動かすユダヤパワーの秘密, Secrets of the Jewish Power that Controls the World] was published by Eizaburo Saito, a

³⁰ “The ADL GLOBAL 100: An Index of Anti-Semitism,” Anti-Defamation League Global 100 (accessed June 20, 2019, <http://global100.adl.org/#country/japan/2014>).

³¹ Hillel Levine, *In Search of Sugihara: The Elusive Japanese Diplomat Who Risked His Life to Rescue 10,000 Jews from the Holocaust* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

leading member of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan.³² Two years later the book *Yudaya ga wakaruto sekai ga miete kuru* [ユダヤが分かると世界が見えて来る, To Watch Jews Is to See the World Clearly] by Masami Uno became one of Japan's bestsellers. The premise of the book is that Ashkenazim, contrary to Sephardi Jews, are “fake Jews.”³³ The same year Kinji Yajima, an economist professor at Tokyo's Aoyama Gakuin University, published *Yudaya purotokoru cho-urayomi-jutsu* [ユダヤ・プロトコール超裏読み術, The Expert Way to Read Jewish Protocols] which also became one of Japan's bestsellers by claiming that the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* were “put together from the results of all the research ever done on the Jews...There is no doubt that the contents consist of the wisdom of the Jews.”³⁴

In February 1995, which Medzini calls the time “of much warmth and friendship at many levels,”³⁵ the Japanese magazine *Marco Polo*, with a quarter million issues monthly, published a Holocaust denial article by physician Masanori Nishioka that stated:

“The Holocaust is a fabrication. There were no execution gas chambers in Auschwitz or in any other concentration camp. Today, what are displayed as 'gas chambers' at the remains of the Auschwitz camp in Poland are a post-war fabrication by the Polish communist regime or by the Soviet Union, which controlled the country. Not once, neither at Auschwitz nor in any territory controlled by the Germans during the Second World War, was there 'mass murder of Jews' in 'gas chambers.'”³⁶

³² Michael L. Beeman, *Public Policy and Economic Competition in Japan: Change and Continuity in Antimonopoly Policy* (London: Routledge, 2003).

³³ Abraham H. Foxman, *Jews and Money: The Story of a Stereotype* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 76.

³⁴ Esther Webman, ed., *The Global Impact of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion: A Century-Old Myth* (London: Routledge, 2012).

³⁵ Medzini, “From Alienation to Partnership,” 232.

³⁶ Masanori Nishioka, “The Greatest Taboo of Postwar World History: There Were No Nazi ‘Gas Chambers,’” *Marco Polo*, February 1995.

Four years later Japan's *The Weekly Post* wrote that:

“The strong will of Jewish finance capital, which prides itself on its enormous power and covers the world's financial markets like a fine net, was behind the buyout of LTCBJ. It is not hard to imagine that the offensive of Jewish finance capital will intensify the cutthroat struggle for survival among companies brought on by the 1997 Asian financial crisis.”³⁷

After complaints by Jewish groups, *The Weekly Post* published an apology on its home page stating that “the problem stemmed from the stereotyped image of the Jewish people that many Japanese people have.”³⁸ And more recently, in 2014, a total of 31 municipal libraries in Japan reported the vandalization of 265 copies of *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank.³⁹

None of this was mentioned in Medzini's article on the partnership between Israel and Japan. Unfortunately, he himself should be more careful in his writing. *From Alienation to Partnership: Israel–Japan Relation* produced the weird conspiracy theory of global Jewish communities advocating Israeli diplomacy in their countries:

“Unlike many countries in Europe, North, and South America, Israeli diplomats could not be helped by the tiny Jewish community in Tokyo. The local Jews had no influence on the Japanese media, politics, academia, and culture. Some were Jews who settled in Japan during the 7 years of American occupation of that country. They could not be counted on to open doors in the right places.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Toshikawa Takao, “Jewish Capital Accelerates the Law of the Jungle,” qtd. in Goodman and Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind*, 276–78.

³⁸ Kapner and Levine, “The Jews of Japan.”

³⁹ Martin Fackler, “Hundreds of Anne Frank Books Vandalized in Japan,” *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 2014 (accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/22/world/asia/diary-of-anne-frank-vandalized-at-japanese-libraries.html>).

⁴⁰ Medzini, “From Alienation to Partnership,” 233.

This holds no ground. Jewish people across the world are among the strongest critics of Israel and have always been so since the beginning of Herzl's Zionism until today. One must only look at countries with vast Jewish communities such as Russia, Argentina or France. They have certainly not always acted very Israel-friendly in history. So where are the Jews "opening the doors in the right places" for Israel in these countries? On the other hand, countries that have been rather friendly towards Israel such as Costa Rica, Guatemala, the Philippines, or South Korea have minimal Jewish presence. The Japan that Medzini imagines, and the actual one - the two could hardly be more different.⁴¹

⁴¹ This article became possible with the generous financial support of the Japan Society of the Promotion of Sciences (JSPS).

