

A New Eastern Exposure For Fundraisers

As Jewish presence and wealth grow in China and the Far East, Israelis mine philanthropic gold.



United Israel Appeal is poised to open a new office in Shanghai, above. The group is now raising millions of dollars from Jews in the Far East. Getty Images

by Steve Lipman

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With the U.S. economy faltering and nonprofits scrambling to meet their fundraising goals, an unexpected source of philanthropic dollars is emerging: Jews in the Far East.

On the eve of the Summer Olympics in Beijing, which open Aug. 8., a growing Jewish presence in the Far East and Southeast Asia — and its growing wealth — is coming into sharper relief.

Expatriates from Israel and several Western countries, usually successful businesspeople and high-tech specialists, are moving to places like China, India and Singapore in increasing numbers. In the region, whose total Jewish population numbers about 10,000 (China's is by far the largest), members of the community are establishing a network of religious and cultural organizations there, and supporting Jewish causes back home, especially in Israel.

The evidence is mounting.

A Shanghai office of Keren Hayesod, the chief fundraising group for the State of Israel, is slated to open next year, Yishai Haramati, Keren Hayesod representative in Hong Kong, told The Jewish Week. The Hong Kong office, which opened four and a half years ago and serves China, South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and India, now raises “a [dollar] figure of seven digits” per year, two or three times the annual amount brought in during previous years when a Keren Hayesod official came a few times a year. “We are improving.”

In the coming weeks, Haramati said, a benefit Israeli concert will be held in Manila and a speech by an Israeli general is scheduled in Hong Kong.

This, in addition to such religious events as High Holy Days services in Seoul and Ho Chi Minh City.

Keren Hayesod, known as the United Israel Appeal in the United States, does not plan any fundraising events in Beijing during or after the Olympics, Haramati said. “The attention of the public is on other things. During the summer many people are away.”

The number of philanthropic-minded people in the region has expanded so much, he said in a telephone interview from Israel, that he contacts prospective contributors through e-mail, newspaper advertisements and communal events. Earlier solicitations were all done face-to-face, he said.

A wide variety of Jewish fundraisers, mostly visiting Israelis, vie for contributions, he said. He mentions Jewish

National Fund, universities and hospitals. “The competition is very heavy,” said Haramati.

The nonprofit group Moms for Israel, founded by two Upper West Side residents, has already taken advantage of the growing Jewish presence in the East.

The group, which sends children from the rocket-battered city of Sderot to summer camps in Israel — with support from the Jewish Agency, the One Family Fund and Jewish National Fund — raised some \$350,000 at parlor meetings and other fundraising events in scores of cities across the United States and Canada. Plus one in Paris.

And one in Hong Kong.

Meredith Berkman, a freelance writer who lived in Hong Kong for a few years in the late 1990s, contacted some friends there, and they earmarked some proceeds for the camps from a community-wide auction held in a major hotel.

“It’s certainly not surprising to see that Jewish philanthropy is going there,” said Jeffrey Solomon, president of Andrea and Charles Philanthropies. “Where there is economic opportunity, very often Jewish entrepreneurs follow.”

Solomon calls this part of the “globalization of philanthropy. As wealth is spreading, philanthropy is spreading.”

Are U.S.-based Jewish charities likely to follow Israeli groups to the Far East to raise funds?

“I don’t think so,” Solomon said. “For the most part, North American Jewish communities rely on themselves. It’s not inexpensive to create entities to do fundraising overseas.”

“There are lots of Israelis who are not living in Israel,” said Gary Tobin, president of the San Francisco-based Institute for Jewish & Community Research. Foreign entrepreneurs turn up wherever economies boom, he says. “People are not moving to Hong Kong to work in factories.” And wherever there is Jewish wealth, “Philanthropy is going to follow.”

“This is one of the most positive developments in the Jewish world,” Rabbi Mordechai Avtzon, director of Chabad’s Asian operations, told the Australian Jewish News. “China is a big story, and its growing economy will demand more and more Jewish people, whether they’re selling simple trinkets or setting up highly sophisticated operations.”

Chabad, which has dispatched representatives to hundreds of communities around the world, usually serves as an early harbinger of a blossoming Jewish community, Tobin said. (The liberal Kehilat Beijing organization is also increasingly active in Beijing.)

“They are the first one. They are doing a wonderful job,” Haramati said.

The outreach-oriented chasidic movement has expanded its presence in the Orient in recent years, sending emissaries who lead worship services and teach classes in such venues as South Korea, Singapore, Laos, Thailand, a half-dozen cities in China and Bangalore, India. Many of these Far East Chabad Houses are funded by New York’s philanthropic Rohr family.

“After years of serving Bangalore’s Jewish community through frequent visits and summer and holiday stints by rabbinical students, Rabbi Gabriel Holtzberg, Chabad representative in Bombay, determined that Karnataka’s capital city is due its own Chabad center,” the Lubavitch.com Web site reported last month. “There were many requests by local Jews wanting to see a permanent Chabad center open in Bangalore.”

Outside of well-connected philanthropic circles, “I don’t think too many people know” about this phenomenon of Jewish fundraising in the Far East, Haramati said.

Conducting fundraising campaigns in countries that have minuscule Jewish communities — from Laos’ handful to China’s several thousand — and sometimes powerful Islamic populations, he said he has encountered neither government interference nor public anti-Semitism.

Keren Hayesod is able to openly operate and publicize its pro-Israel activities, Haramati says. “In general, there is no anti-Semitism in Asia. No problem whatsoever.”

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