



A Synagogue Survives in Land of Ancient Pagodas

Wahyuni Kamah

Downtown Yangon, Myanmar, is crowded in the afternoons, especially in the area's commercial center. Street vendors, passing pedestrians, buses and cars dominate the streets of this multi-ethnic part of the country's former capital.

I was walking down the Maha Bandoolla Road, Yangon's main business boulevard, looking for 26th Street as I took in the hustle and bustle of the area. The current street layout of Yangon is the legacy of British occupation in the middle of the 19th century.

The downtown block system, which numbers the streets in sequential order, makes it relatively easy to find the one I was searching for.

Tucked amid the stalls and shops selling various fishing merchandise is a building bearing the menorah (a seven branched candelabrum and the symbol for Judaism).

Its gates wide open, I entered the white colonial building and home to the Mesmuah Yeshua Synagogue, where I was met by its caretaker, Moses Samuels.

I was about to take off my shoes when Samuels gestured with his hand, signaling that it wasn't necessary.

It was my first time visiting a synagogue and the irony of visiting a Jewish place of worship in a Buddhist nation known for its ancient pagodas was not lost on me.

When the British occupied the Indian Empire (which later became modern India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, as well as Penang, Malacca and Singapore) in the 19th century, Rangoon became the capital of British Burma (now Myanmar). Rangoon is the anglicized form of Yangon, the original name of the city.

The flourishing commercial center attracted Jewish merchants from Iraq to trade with India. The community gradually grew to comprise of some 2,500 people, which prompted the construction of Mesmuah Yeshua Synagogue in 1854. The building was made entirely of wood.

Decades later, in 1893, the wooden structure was replaced with the current concrete building, thanks in part to Samuels's grandfather.

The Jewish community was particularly active in trading, and became so influential that in 1910 the city had a Jewish mayor. They gave donation to the local school, libraries, hospitals and also helped the locals in various ways. The community was treated with respect and the residents of Yangon lived in harmony, despite their religious differences.

Maha Bandoolla Rd. was home to a variety of Jewish businesses, including various shops, clinics, trade offices and even a school that educated some 200 students. A Jewish cemetery protecting 700 graves exists to this day.

"I was born in Myanmar," said Samuels, whose grandfather came from Iraq.

Built in 1854 at the height of Myanmar's reign as a center for commerce, the Mesmuah Yeshua Synagogue still stands today as a symbol of religious harmony in bustling downtown Yangon.

JG Photos/
Wahyuni Kamah

The caretaker gave me a tour of the synagogue and allowed me to take as many pictures as my camera allowed.

The interior is very reflective of the country's colonial era. Two rows of columns lead into majestic arches that nearly touch the high ceilings. The arched windows that line up on both walls are adorned with colored glass, reminding me of windows found in Iran's desert cities.

Framed, rattan chairs rest on marbled floors that reflect the fans spinning from the ceiling, keeping the synagogue cool.

In the center of the room lies a *bimah*, a raised, square platform enclosed by a low fence intricately decorated with golden carvings used for Torah readings during service. Electric powered menorahs stand on both sides of the bimah.

Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue was once home to 126 *Sefer Torah* (handwritten scrolls of the Torah), but now only two remain. They are kept safe in a sanctuary, called the Holy Ark, located behind the bimah.

The Holy Ark is a small room protected by three doors hidden by curtains bearing symbols of Judaism, including the menorah and Star of David. Its middle door was open, prompting me to tentatively enter the room. I saw nothing but a cabinet covered with rich, red fabric that hung on the wall. In it were two beautifully carved protective silver vessels where the *Sefer Torah* are kept.

The cabinet faces Jerusalem, the direction worshipers face when praying.

The second floor of the synagogue is reserved especially for female congregates, according to Samuels.

The caretaker, who is married to a Burmese woman, has single-handedly cared for the building for 20 years with the help of donations, which also allow him to maintain the Jewish cemetery.

When asked how many Jews currently live in Myanmar, Samuels estimated there are only 20 left in the country, eight of whom reside in Yangon.

Most members of the country's Jewish community fled the country during the Japanese occupation from 1942-1945 to escape persecution as they had been accused of spying for the British.

Some attempted to return in the '60s, but by then the government had nationalized its industries. With no chance of finding work or creating their own businesses, a majority had no choice but to leave once more. The last rabbi of Yangon left toward the end of the decade and the Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue has not held a service since.

In 2013, Samuels held the first *chauppah* (Jewish wedding) in 20 years in the synagogue for his son's nuptials.

Though it no longer conducts services, the synagogue does celebrate Jewish holidays, including Yom Kippor and Rosh Hashana.

"Every year at Hanukkah, we invite leaders of different [religious] communities in Yangon to light a candle," Samuels said, adding that building welcomes tourists and visitors of all faiths.

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Every year at Hanukkah, we invite leaders of different religious communities in Yangon to light a candle

Moses Samuels, caretaker



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