Yom Kippur Thoughts: The Last Jews of Bukhara?
Temple Israel of Greater Miami Creative Worship Service
Jo Anne Bander, October 13, 20054

Rabbi Chevitz spoke this morning of the continuity of the Jews; while the future has always been unknown and unpredictable, we have persevered and flourished. I invite you on the stone-studded dirt path I walked two weeks ago along side unkempt sand-colored windowless walls into the labyrinth that was the Jewish quarter of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, a former republic of the Soviet Union, 85% Moslem, on the Afghanistan border. The quarter is right off Lyab-i-Hauz Square with its pool, a central gathering place. Women passed in flowing robes and draped heads, faces looking down rather than at us, and men in baggy, dark clothing with caps.

The quarter was indistinguishable from many such streets we had wandered in Moslem neighborhoods in Western China. There were no signs of Jewish life, although we were in the oldest Jewish community in Uzbekistan, purportedly established more than 2,000 years ago after the destruction of King Solomon's Temple in the 6th Century BCE and the subsequent exile of the Jews. If not then, it began when Jews fled Persian persecution over 1,500 years ago, and grew when Jews came to Uzbekistan as merchants on the Silk Road in the seventh century.

The community brought with them the culture and customs from whence they came—as ancient as Zoroastism--but practiced the basic tenants of Judaism. Most were artisans and merchants since land ownership was forbidden them. And, like most other Uzbeks, they rode out the tumultuous history of the region, marked by invasions by Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, and the others who ravaged Central Asia. The community lived isolated from Jewish communities in Europe. The hundreds of years of isolation and forced Islamization of the 1700's led to a decline in Jewish religious and spiritual activity in Bukhara, that was turned around with the arrival of Rabbi Joseph Maman Maghribi in 1793. A Sephardic Moroccan Jew, he began a rivial of Bukharan religious and spiritual life, introducing Sephardic traditions and prayer to a community which had all but forgotten their Persian rites and recruited European religious teachers. Contact with European Jewry was established when Russia became dominant, and then escalated with the Communist Revolution and WW II. While the community was restricted to the old quarter, Jewish merchants established lucrative trade businesses

and the woman became known for their elaborate gold thread embroidery. Behind these crumbling walls had been, and might still, magnificent homes and courtyards.

The community peaked at 18 to 20,000 Jews in the early 1970's, built by inflows in the 19th and 20th century by Russians and Holocaust survivors. In 1917, there were 13 synagogues in Bukhara, all shuttered under communism. The same trend that sent Jews immigrating out of Russia in the late 1970's escalated after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, making the Jews fearful of living with a rising Muslim fundamentalist population, and led the Bukharan Jews to Israel and Queens. Today there are only between 500 and 1,000, mostly the very young, the very old or those with no place else to go or unwilling to leave their roots. The Community was given permission to open one synagogue in 1945, and opened the Sephardic synagogue. The other synagogue, the main synagogue, was reopened in 1992 and is supported by the Chabad.

We were looking for the Jewish day school, School #36, which had been religious rather than secular until 1994. It was certified by the Uzbekistan school system in 2000. We came quickly to a nondescript doorway with a simple sign—Shehebar Sephardic Center—in English and Hebrew and passed through a narrow corridor into a small courtyard with peeling paint, the Uzbekistan and Israeli flags hanging next to each other, paintings and drawings produced by the children and posters showing forests in Israel on the walls. The school has 155 students, all from families that have been in Bukhara for generations, and goes from Kindergarten through 11th grade, when university begins. It is free of charge, supported by Israel and the Joint Distribution Committee. The youngsters—the boys in white shirts and colorfully embroidered Kippa and the girls in white blouses and black skirts-- had access to only six computers and basics like pencils and paper seemed in short supply.

We were greeted by an elderly returnee at the old Sephardic synagogue, the first to have reopened. He had immigrated to the US, but come back to the Bukhara he loves. The rabbi was trained in Bukhara. The walls of the small, shabby shul are decorated with some beautiful velvet and gold embroidered hangings--but the prayerbooks are in tatters. The rabbi told us the minion still meets twice a day, but I found myself incredulous. The shul is a repository of torahs dating several hundred years. Near the synagogue at the community center, the nursery school children were waking from their naps while a women's study group met in the courtyard.

We ended with a visit to the main synagogue, sparkling white with gold trim from a restoration in the early 1990's, and a bearded rabbi in Brown jacket, fedora and baggy pants clipped with clothespins. The synagogue proudly displays the picture of Hillary Clinton when she visited in November, 1997. Supported by the Chabad, it is the showcase of Bukhara Jews. The pure white walls are decorated by gold embossed Jewish symbols, elaborate velvet and gold wall hangings of the ten commandments and even a Suzanni, the traditional embroidery and applique, with Hebrew letters. Behind the tabernacle the Uzbekistan silk brocade curtains cover a collection of ancient torahs ranging back 500 to 600 years, produced by scribes in the community, many decorated with the gold leaf, script and drawings that pull from the community's ancient traditions. Unlike our draped torahs, they are enclosed in cylinder containers.

As we worship here on Yom Kippur afternoon in the joy of a resurgent urban Jewish community, the Jews of Bukhara have broken their fast and are asleep. I visualize the unshaven rabbi of the Sephardic shul in his rumbled short sleeve shirt and baggy pants, trying to imagine him in white robes in front of a packed dovening congregation. Is there anyone left who represents the vibrant mercantile life of an earlier time? Is the school a commitment to the future or a futile stab at stabilizing a small community that will drift as circumstances allow? Are the school and main synagogue propaganda statements--an effort to keep the small Jewish community in place to serve as a symbol to the world that Uzbekistan's authoritarian government respects religious diversity? Does this community really live with peace and respect with Moslem neighbors in spite of a history of discrimination and subjugation? Are the two bed and breakfasts in formerly Jewish mansions a sign of the transition of the community into a destination for Jewish tourists like the uninhabited old Jewish quarters of Spain? Does it matter that Jews have done what we always do—leave for places that present economic opportunity, religious freedom and connection? I left Bukhara with more questions than answers, but I cannot erase from my mind the snapshots of a resilient people who have ridden and survived the waves of subjugation and oppression that rode through the region, and who have preserved their Jewish heritage. It is a reminder to us all of commitment, endurance and continuity.