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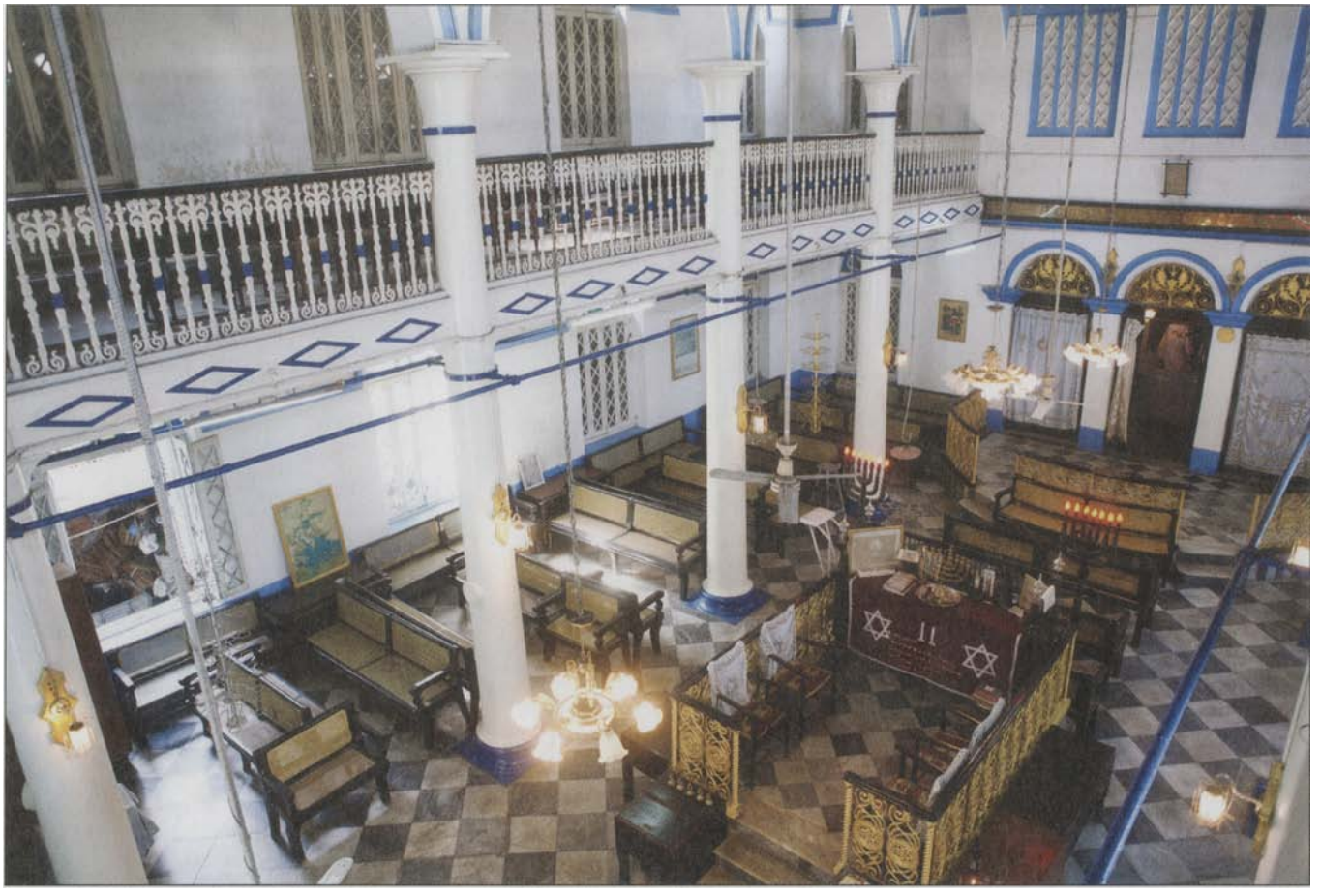
Letter from Myanmar

After decades of repressive military rule, Burma's Jewish community has dwindled to about 20 members. Is there hope for its future? A rare look at life inside the isolated country.

Story by Jeremy Gillick
Photos by Chris Davy

As the sun sets in Burma, now known as Myanmar, a small group of Jews descends on the Park Royal Hotel in downtown Yangon, formerly Rangoon. I arrive unfashionably early, hoping to steal some private time with Sammy Samuels, the debonair Burmese-American host of the third annual Myanmar Jewish Community Dinner Reception. But apparently it is fashionable for Burmese Jews to arrive late, and Sammy is nowhere to be found. At 6:30, tuxedoed caterers begin distributing glasses of Israeli and French wines to guests socializing in the lobby. I chat briefly with Cho, the daughter of Myanmar's foreign minister, who professes her love for Israel, and then with an impeccably dressed British diplomat who is superb at making small talk. When I ask if I should be concerned about reporting from such a public location, he points to secret police lurking in the corners and suggests steering clear of discussing politics. "Once you've lived here a while, they're easy to spot," he says.

At last, Sammy himself strides in. Short with a wide face, kind eyes and dark hair puffed up in the front, his relaxed demeanor belies the gravity of the task ahead of him. He is one of perhaps 20 Jews—many of them elderly or intermarried—left in the entire country. Back in 2002, *The New York Times* dubbed him the "last hope for the Jews of Myanmar," reporting that he would soon set off for Yeshiva University (YU) in New York, where he hoped to find a Jewish wife who would return home with him. Although Sammy graduated from YU with honors in 2006, today, at 29, he is still single, childless and living in New York City. At his side is his father Moses, 60, who resides in central Yangon with his wife and two daughters. Moses is the patriarch of Yangon's Jewish community: He has looked after the city's sole synagogue since his father Isaac, Sammy's grandfather, passed away in 1978.



The Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue was built in the mid-1890s and steadfastly maintains its Sephardic traditions.

Myanmar, the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, is bordered by India to the west and China to the east. A British colony until 1948, it has one of the world's oldest military dictatorships—going on 50 years and ruling over 50 million people. In 1989, the military regime officially renamed Burma, the English colonial-era name, as Myanmar. When Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won the 1990 election, the military nullified the results, and Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest for much of the past 20 years. "It is not an army regime sitting on top of an otherwise civilian state," writes Thant Myint-U, a historian and former Burmese-American U.N. official, in his 2006 book, *The River of Lost Footsteps: A Personal History of Burma*. "By the 1990s the military was the state. Army officers did everything. Normal government had withered away," the grandson of U Thant, the third secretary-general of the United Nations, argues in his book.

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), as the junta renamed itself in 1997, has one of the world's worst human rights records. Amnesty International and other groups condemn it for committing widespread and systematic human rights abuses against the country's ethnic minorities, including destruction of villages, forced labor and sexual violence. The Muslim Rohingya people in the northern state of Rakhine (also called Arakan) were stripped of their citizenship under a 1982 law, and the junta's military offensive against the autonomy-seeking Karen in the south has been particularly brutal.

The junta is also known for its suppression of a free press. Not even a story about the Jews, a near-extinct minority, is beyond suspicion. An article about the dinner reception I attended, co-written for the *Myanmar Times* by Gabrielle Paluch, one of the 10 or so Jewish expatriates in Burma, and Burmese reporter Pan Eiswe Star was initially deemed unfit for publication by the Myanmar Press Scrutiny Board (PSB). "In Myanmar all the articles are scrutinized by the PSB. We cannot complain to them," wrote Star in an email. Gmail and Yahoo are blocked, at least in theory, and the government's Orwellian newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*, routinely urges its readers to "crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy." A popular local joke holds that George Orwell, who served in Burma from 1922

The synagogue, the only Jewish place of worship in Myanmar, is located in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood in Yangon.

to 1927 as a British imperial policeman wrote two books about the country: *Burmese Days* and *1984*.

With the exception of Aung San Suu Kyi's confinement, Burma's affairs rarely make the front page of Western newspapers. But the bloody crackdown on orange-robed Buddhist monks who rose up in protest in 2007, followed by the devastating 2008 Cyclone Nargis, which flattened the delta region and left 150,000 dead, has kept the country in the news. A particular source of international outrage was the junta's delaying and blocking of aid in the aftermath of the cyclone. Israel was one of the few countries allowed to offer direct aid, through MASHAV, the country's equivalent of the United States Agency for International Development. Sammy, who was then working for the American Jewish Congress in New York, bought a ticket home and, according to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, smuggled a suitcase full of water purification tablets and medicine into the country.

This year's Jewish dinner reception in the Park Royal's Grand Ballroom came on the heels of 77-year-old dictator Than Shwe's announcement that in 2010, Burma would hold its first elections in 20 years. Many observers believe the elections will be neither free nor fair, if held at all, and most Burmese I met were reluctant to even broach the subject. But as the wine flowed and chatter filled the air, I sensed that there was still a kernel of hope at the gathering, a sense that change, for Burma—and its Jews—could be coming.

One May day in 1960, 11-year-old Sally Joseph, her mother Florence, and her two younger sisters boarded the M.V. Worcestershire, a passenger ferry docked in Rangoon. She remembers little of the journey, except for the last night. "The sun never came up, and I thought to myself: what kind of a place is this?" recalls the 62-year-old Los Angeles resident, a genial woman with graying hair and remnants of a British accent. The family had arrived in England, along with other Burmese expatriates fleeing the waves of xenophobia and socialism sweeping Burma.

Joseph's family eventually moved to the United States, and she never planned to return to the country where she was born. But a few years ago, she learned from Moses Samuels' cousin, who lives in Australia and is one of her closest friends, that Yangon's municipal authorities were threatening to move the cemetery where her father and nearly 700 other Jews are

buried. "I felt compelled to visit my father's grave before that happened," she tells me. This past January, as part of a tour organized by Myanmar Shalom Travels & Tours, Joseph went to Burma for the first time since she fled 50 years ago. While many large commercial enterprises have been nationalized, small private businesses such as Myanmar Shalom, founded in 2005 by Sammy and Moses, are allowed to operate. Moses is the nominal director, but Sammy is the real force behind the company's dual mission: to preserve Myanmar's Jewish legacy and to help open up the insular country through tourism.

I meet Joseph at the reception at the Park Royal, where she reports that she has located her father's grave. She has also found the house where she and her family once lived. "I am happy to be back amongst the Burmese people," she tells me. "Their kindness and generosity are as I remember them, and I admire their resilience so much."

Both the Joseph and Samuels families are descendants of Baghdadi merchants who migrated to India and across Southeast Asia in the 19th century. Although some Bene Israel and Cochini Jews from India made it to Burma in the early 1800s, serious Jewish settlement didn't begin until after the British conquered Rangoon in 1852. It was then that a wealthy Baghdad-born merchant, David Sassoon, set up trading empires in Bombay, Shanghai and Singapore and sent a mission to Burma in search of teak. According to the late Ruth Fredman Cernea, an anthropologist and author of *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma*, the Sassoons probably underwrote Rangoon's first small synagogue. Built in the 1850s, it stood near the Sule Pagoda, an ancient temple that is said to contain a strand of the Buddha's hair.

By the turn of the century, more than 500 Baghdadi Jews had settled in Burma, mostly in Rangoon. They lived primarily on Dalhousie and Mogul streets, near the synagogue, trading in coffee, alcohol, timber, teak and other goods, and serving as customs officials. Arabic, Judeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew characters) and English were the primary languages, though it was not uncommon for Jews to learn Hindi or Burmese. Hebrew was generally reserved for the synagogue. Life was good for most Jews, writes Cernea, with the rich supporting the poor through the charitable funds of the Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue, which replaced the original synagogue in the mid-

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1890s. Some Jews became notable public figures: Judah Ezekiel, an employee of the British East India Company and philanthropist, had a street named for him, and David Sophaer was Rangoon's mayor in the 1930s.

Descendants of the Burmese Jews look back fondly on their families' years here. "My mom talked about Burma all of the time," says Stuart Spencer, a U.S. expatriate living in Hong Kong, where he serves as senior vice president of the Chubb Group of Insurance Companies. "The Jews flourished under British rule. She said those were the glory days. It was safe, the community was tight, there were good interreligious and ethnic relations, and there was freedom."

Life was far from problem-free. Wealthy Baghdadis seeking upward social mobility were frustrated by the British who barred them, and the Burmese, from social clubs. But the Baghdadis also replicated the British system of discrimination by treating the Bene Israel, their poorer brethren from India, with disdain. "The Baghdadis," writes Cernea, "measured themselves against the British at one pole and against 'lower class/caste' Jews at the other. To be identified with these less sophisticated populations seemed to threaten their acceptance as British." Intermarriage was frowned upon, and Baghdadi brides were often imported from elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In 1913, the Baghdadi Jews even forbade Bene Israel from having *aliyot* in the synagogue and from serving on its board of trustees. The Bene Israel took the matter all the way to Rangoon's High Court, where, in 1935, according to Cernea, a British justice declared that the "defendants are not entitled to exclude from the lists...a Jew merely because he is a Bene Israel."

Internal social tensions were overshadowed by the outbreak of World War II. Most of the approximately 2,500 Jews living in Burma fled after the Japanese began bombing Rangoon on December 24, 1941. Among them was Stuart Spencer's mother, who never returned, and Sally Joseph's father, Abraham Ezra Joseph, who trekked alongside hundreds of thousands of other Burmese refugees through the mountains and across the Indian border to Calcutta.

Abraham was one of 500 or so Jews to return to Burma once the war ended. He married Florence, and Sally was born on July 18, 1948, shortly after Burma—and Israel—achieved independence from the British. Abraham passed away unexpectedly in 1957 at the age of 46, before a short-lived but ominous coup made it clear that Baghdadi Jews who chose to keep their British citizenship were not welcome. "Things really started to change in 1959 when it became more socialist," says Joseph. The exodus began. "I

always asked my mom why she wouldn't go back to Rangoon," says Spencer, "and she would say 'there's nothing to go back to.' Everything was expropriated, her property was all stolen."

While the Burmese Jewish immigrants began new lives in the United States and Britain, a friendship bloomed between Israel and Burma, both young, socialist and, in an increasingly polarized world, nonaligned.

Standing over six feet, Ambassador Yaron Mayer, a veteran of the Israeli foreign service, is one of the tallest men in Burma. Mayer's short speech at the banquet is heavy on diplomatic cliches such as "friendly relations" and "potential for cooperation." Embassy staff had set up a photo exhibit around the Grand Ballroom's perimeter depicting the early history of Israeli-Burmese relations—"in honor of their 55th anniversary," Mayer tells me. There was a photograph of throngs of Israelis greeting Burmese Prime Minister U Nu as he arrived in Tel Aviv in 1955—against the wishes of Arab leaders—to jump start agricultural cooperation between the two arid nations, the first visit to Israel by a foreign head of state. But there was no mention that Burma had voted "no" on Israeli membership at the UN in 1949, a moot point because in December of that year, Burma became one of the first nations to recognize Israel's independence. The Israeli embassy in Burma, established in 1957, was a boon for the remaining Jews, offering them protection and an avenue to emigration.

Prime Ministers David Ben-Gurion and U Nu developed a close personal friendship. U Nu purportedly taught Ben-Gurion to stand on his head; in 1961, the 75-year-old Ben-Gurion, who had once ridiculed U Nu—"the man knows nothing about Buddhism"—spent several days meditating and studying the religion with U Nu, then a devout Buddhist monk. *Time* reported that the Israeli legend "wowed his hosts by showing up attired like a potbellied pixy in Burma's traditional gaungbaung headgear and silk sarong." Other Israeli politicians, too, befriended their Burmese counterparts. In Shimon Peres' 1995 book, *Battling for Peace: A Memoir*, he recalls being rowed around Mandalay in a small boat with then IDF chief of staff Moshe Dayan and their host, soon-to-be Burmese dictator General Ne Win. "He said the only country he believed in was Israel," wrote Peres.

(Top) Moses Samuels, 60, at Yangon's Jewish cemetery, and (bottom) Sammy, 29, in New York.

PHOTO OF SAMMY SAMUELS: MARIELA LOMBARD, NY DAILY NEWS

On Friday evening, the day after the banquet, I meet Ambassador Mayer at the Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue, a beautiful, open-air building with blue and white pillars and green stained glass windows. Although its roof was torn off by Cyclone Nargis in 2008, it now looks as good as new. Donations for its repair and preservation came from the US-ASEAN Business Council—which has secured an exemption for the project

from U.S. sanctions against Myanmar—as well as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and some individual donors. Like the mosques that dot the surrounding neighborhood, the synagogue's cool interior makes it a blissful respite from Yangon's oppressive heat. On this night, a cheerful Moses Samuels shuffles outside to greet us. Burmese men are masterful shufflers, and Moses, an older, bespectacled version of his son, shuffles with the best of them. The ambassador lights the Shabbat candles, and we join him in reciting the blessings in Hebrew, while Moses, whose grandfather was among the community members who provided donations for the synagogue's construction, and two beleaguered-looking Jewish businessmen visiting from Singapore bow their heads in silence. Then, after we bid Moses and the businessmen goodnight, Mayer's chauffeur whisks us away to an upscale Chinese restaurant on the outskirts of Yangon, near the Generals' residences.

Yaron Mayer grew up on Ein HaShofet ("Spring of the Judge" in Hebrew), a kibbutz near Haifa that is named for Louis Brandeis. "It was the first American kibbutz," he explains, pausing to order Myanmar beer. I ask him about early diplomatic relations. "Burma was an important country then and also an important part of the nonaligned movement," Mayer says. "Israel wanted good relations with Asia, and we thought they could help us be accepted."

As we pass around dishes of duck and mutton over rice and vegetables, Mayer laments the ascent of Ne Win, who seized power in a 1962 military coup d'etat to become chairman of the Revolutionary Council and prime minister and proceeded to implement his Burmese way to socialism. "Ne Win sort of cut ties with the outside world," says Mayer. "He nationalized property, including Jewish property and Israeli firms. Some say he didn't want to be too close to Israel. Still, he kept the embassy."

Ne Win succeeded in running the economy into the ground and by the 1970s, the officially Buddhist country was almost entirely isolated from the world. In 1988, shortly after the Burmese regime brutally suppressed a popular, democratic uprising, an internal coup ensued. The new and less politically ideological military junta—the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)—took charge and has survived in part through limited exports of natural gas, timber and other resources. It is the SPDC that prevented Aung San Suu Kyi from taking power and keeps her under house arrest.

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Toward the end of the meal, I broach the subject of Israeli military aid to Myanmar. Military relations between the two countries were established back in 1954, when there was nothing problematic about two young, democratic nations exchanging strategy and arms. But Israel also has a history of supplying weapons and military training to unsavory regimes—from apartheid South Africa to pre-revolutionary Iran and numerous right-wing dictatorships in Latin America—and for decades, there have been rumors that the Burmese junta, too, is a beneficiary. Mayer insists that Israel's primary assistance to Burma has always come in the form of agricultural training. "Our military attache left in the 1980s, and we have no military ties today," says Mayer. Another embassy official, Eliran Avitan, who oversees security is equally dismissive. "Everyone knows that Israel sells weapons to Myanmar, except for us," he tells me.

The allegation can be traced back to a 2000 article entitled "Myanmar and Israel Develop Military Ties," published in *Jane's Intelligence Review*, a monthly British journal. The piece is attributed to William Ashton, a pseudonym for former Australian diplomat Andrew Selth. "It is now clear that all three arms of the Tatmadaw [Armed Forces] are receiving direct help from Israeli companies. Given its sensitive nature, it is difficult to see how this assistance could be given to Myanmar without the active involvement, or at least the full knowledge and support, of the Israeli government," wrote Selth, an expert on Myanmar's military who is a research fellow at the Australian Research Council.

I ask Mayer for his impressions of Than Shwe, who by now has ruled Burma with an iron fist for nearly 20 years. But the ambassador demurs, remarking only that Israel maintains a healthy relationship with Myanmar, although it has on occasion urged "restraint," for example, during the crackdown on protestors in 2007. Unlike the U.S. and many European countries, Israel has never slapped sanctions on the junta.

We also discuss a mysterious and once powerful figure in Burmese politics—David Abel, Burma's economics czar from the 1988 coup through the 1990s. Abel, who is of Jewish heritage, is rumored to have been a close associate of Than Shwe. A 2001 *Jerusalem Report* article asserted that Abel's mother was born Jewish and his father was, too, according to his Israeli cousin, Esther Daniels-Philips. But Abel, a 75-year-old ex-military man, told the Israeli magazine that his father was an Indian Catholic. "I would not walk around and say I was Jewish. But if asked, I say I have some Jewish blood." In the same inter-

view he spoke disparagingly of Aung San Suu Kyi and repeatedly compared Burma's political regime and situation to Israel's. He expressed tremendous admiration for politicians like Ehud Barak, with their military backgrounds, as well as for Israel. Abel is said to have been purged from the government following a dispute over economic policies with Than Shwe, but Mayer, who has hosted him for Passover Seder, says he retired because of old age. David Steinberg, a professor at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service and an expert on Burma, who also knows Abel, insists that he "was never a part of the inner circle." Whatever Abel's influence, the Jewish community "had good relations with him when he was in power," according to Sammy Samuels, who adds that "all Burma considers him a good and very wise person."

After dinner, we drive to Prime Minister U Nu's pagoda. It is common practice in Burma for politicians to build pagodas to atone for their sins and to win favors in the next life. We remove our shoes and slowly walk clockwise around the huge structure, silently at first. Then the ambassador lectures me on the merits of Vipassana meditation. He tells me that when his stint is up he will be sad to leave Burma, a country that he sees as one of Israel's few, true friends.

For most of their history in the country, Burma has been, as Ruth Cernea once wrote, "a tolerant home for the Jews." To this day, Burmese Jews and their descendants zealously protect Burma's reputation, stressing that any wrongs done to the country's Jews were either perpetrated by the Japanese or stemmed from the Jews' perceived Britishness. For the most part, anti-Semitism has been absent here. Even the looters who targeted the synagogue and other Jewish sites during World War II and then again in the aftermath of Israel's Suez War of 1956 seem to have been forgiven. "Life in Burma as Jews was never threatened," says Sally Joseph. "Everyone co-existed peacefully." And Mayer claims in his speech at the Park Royal that "the term anti-Semitism is unknown here."

Relations are cordial with Yangon's Muslim community, which makes up five percent of Myanmar's population. There is no security at the synagogue, which sits peacefully in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood and is surrounded by mosques and Muslim-owned shops, many of whose proprietors rent from Moses Samuels. Hundreds of Muslims attended Sammy Samuels' bar mitzvah, conducted by then-Israeli Ambassador Ori Noy almost 17 years ago, and Mayer, tagging along with the elder Samuels, says he recently attended—and felt welcomed at—a Shi'ite festival.

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For the time being, the most pressing issue for the descendants of the Baghdadi Jews of Burma—and one that has helped bring the Jewish diaspora back together—is the fate of the cemetery. The city of Yangon first attempted to relocate the Jewish cemetery back in 1997, when it moved to prohibit most burials inside the city limits. Up north in Mandalay, the Muslim and Jewish cemeteries have both been bulldozed, according to Cernea. But there is hope that the Yangon cemetery will be moved. "The authorities have come to every community in Rangoon and offered plots of land outside the city to build new cemeteries," explains Spencer, who is working with Moses and Sammy to raise funds for the new cemetery.

Over *mohinga*, a spicy fish soup, at the luxurious Strand Hotel, Spencer—who is related to Sally Joseph—tells me that he also wants to renovate the mikveh, which is just outside the synagogue. "Moses showed it to me yesterday, and when the light came on, I saw it was decrepit," he says. "It was a dark, wet hole." He worries that if the Burmese Jews and their descendents don't take action quickly, the task of preservation will fall to outsiders. "Chabad came here, as well as a few other groups, and wanted to put a picture of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in the synagogue, but Sammy said no way." When I ask Sammy about this, he replies, "Whatever changes, I want to pray the way we pray. It is a Sephardic synagogue, and we will keep our tradition."

Later Sammy and I meet at the western-style Café 365 beside the Park Royal Hotel. He will be traveling back to New York soon but explains that his work for Myanmar Shalom allows him to stay connected to Burma while he remains in the U.S. "I want to do tourism," Sammy tells me. He thinks that Myanmar will begin to open up in four or five years. "With my education and being Burmese I think I am in a good position to help bring that change."

Sammy has stayed remarkably calm under tremendous social pressure to personally repopulate the Jewish community. He stays mum about his private life but assures me that Burma is his home. "I'm definitely planning to come back to Burma after I get my M.A.," in business. Whether or not he has offspring, he believes there can be a Jewish revival in Myanmar. "When the country opens up, many businesses and Jews might settle here, and our community could actually grow."