

sacred fire ceremony in Israel

(Advertisement)

Agon Shu prays for peace in Jerusalem

Buddhist association takes its Fire Rites ceremony and message of reconciliation to Israel

Jerusalem has so much history that if the stones of the ancient city's walls and streets could talk, there would be an endless cacophony of voices from a myriad of cultures and eras.

But one message emerged strongly during the recent visit to Jerusalem by the Rev. Seiryu Kiriyama, the founder and president of the Agon Shu Buddhist Association, and 400 Agon Shu followers: peace.

Besides being sacred to three major religions — Judaism, Christianity and Islam — Jerusalem is also a major flash point in the ongoing and seemingly intractable Arab-Israeli conflict.

Kiriyama and the members of Agon Shu were in Israel to perform a version of the Fire Rites ceremony. Those attending the ceremony — which received widespread coverage in the Israeli media as it was the first time a Japanese Buddhist organization had held a religious ceremony in the country — came away with a deep sense of the spiritual kinship among the members of all religions and their desire for lasting peace.

And the fact that this year marks the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the state of Israel lent the visit and the ceremony even greater significance.

Kiriyama's visit to Israel in the second week of September was not the first time he had visited the Middle Eastern nation, having made a preparatory visit to Israel in January. During that trip, he visited the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall, which Jews venerate as the sole

in accordance with Buddhist precepts and beliefs.

Agon Shu is based on the Agama Sutras (Agon-gyo), the only sutra to survive today that transmits the direct teachings of Lord Buddha. It is from them that Agon Shu derives its name. These writings contain the precepts known as the "seven systems and 37 curricula," which Agon Shu believers must understand and practice in order to become perfect buddhas.

The Agon Shu Buddhist Association was founded in 1978 by Kiriyama, who had spent several years seeking the ultimate spiritual truth in vain. He finally realized that what was needed was to return to the roots, the source of Buddhism, and it became clear to him the Agama Sutras were what he was looking for.

Since that time, Agon Shu has grown into a community of Buddhist followers with 75 institutes in Japan, 35 ordained priests, and nearly 400,000 followers in Japan and thousands more overseas.

In Buddhist terms, Agon Shu's believers and their spiritual leaders comprise a community called a "sangha" which, together with the Buddha and the dharma, is one of the three main elements revered in all forms of Buddhism.

In the Agon Shu Buddhist faith, the Lord Buddha is the ultimate object of worship. A relic of the historical Buddha occupies a central place on the altar at the Fire Rites Festival. The dharma, or ultimate truth, comprises the teachings, vows and practices of Buddhism.

In its teachings and rituals, Agon Shu

play of silverware and other household valuables plundered by the Nazis and their collaborators from Jewish families; here is a ritual shofar horn secretly crafted by a religious Jew in the Auschwitz death camp; here is a pile of shoes taken from the bodies of Jews who had been gassed to death.

As if to emphasize the theme of the Jewish people's continuing fight for survival, a group of Israeli soldiers — male and female — pauses in front of a display recounting the story of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943, when Jewish resistance organizations launched a bold but ultimately doomed armed struggle against Nazi efforts to transport the remaining ghetto population to the Treblinka extermination camp.

One of the museum's most chilling displays comprises a series of portraits of the principal architects of the Holocaust: The Nazi military officers, bureaucrats and other officials who collectively planned and committed one of the greatest crimes in human history.

Pages of Testimony

This is followed by Yad Vashem's Hall of Names, which contains the museum's Pages of Testimony — short biographies of each Holocaust victim. So far over 2 million pages have been stored in the circular repository around the outer edge of the hall, with room for 6 million in all. Forming the ceiling of the hall is a 10-meter-high cone reaching skyward on which are displayed 600 photographs and frag-

Kiriyama was handed a torch with which he relit the flame, after which he laid a memorial wreath on the stone slab covering the Holocaust victims' ashes.

He then visited the Children's Memorial, hallowed out from an underground cavern, where five memorial candles, a Jewish tradition to remember the dead, are reflected infinitely in a dark and somber space. This memorial is a tribute to the approximately 1.5 million Jewish children who died during the Holocaust.

Righteous among the nations

After meditating upon the overwhelming tragedy of the Holocaust, a walk through The Avenue and Garden of the Righteous among the Nations is refreshing because of the light, greenery and fresh air, but also because it shows that many non-Jewish people risked their lives to save Jews from the Nazi death machine.

Some 2,000 trees have been planted in and around the avenue. Plaques adjacent to each tree give the names of those being honored along with their country of residence during the war.

Kiriyama and his group were guided to a pine tree dedicated to the memory of Chiune Sugihara, a quietly courageous man who in his capacity as vice consul for Japan in Soviet-occupied Lithuania helped several thousand Jewish refugees from German-occupied Europe to leave the country by issuing them with transit visas.

Showing Agon Shu's equal concern with the here and now, Kiriyama and his party then traveled a short distance to the Jerusalem headquarters of Yad Sarah, the largest voluntary organization in Israel. Yad Sarah provides a spectrum of free or nominal-cost services designed to make life easier for sick, disabled and elderly people, and their families, and has 103 branches throughout Israel run by more than 6,000 volunteers.

The purpose of Kiriyama's visit to Yad Sarah was to donate 1,000 wheelchairs to the organization.

"Wheelchairs are among the most requested items," said Yad Sarah official Daniel Scheer in a speech at a ceremony where the wheelchairs were formally handed over to Yad Sarah. "In 2007, 40,000 wheelchairs were donated. 2008 is on track to surpass that number. Therefore, Agon Shu's gift to Yad Sarah at this particular time is even more critical. Wheelchairs, like all of Yad Sarah's services, provide independence for those with illnesses or with special needs."

"In the name of the 6,000 volunteers, and in the name of the approximately 400,000 individuals who use our services each year, we thank you for joining with us to repair a small part of the world," Scheer said.

On Sept. 9, a group of Agon Shu faithful dressed as "yamabushi (mountain priests)" made a special visit to the Western Wall to pray for world peace.

"This is a Jewish holy place, so we follow the Jewish way of praying," noted Agon Shu members after praying at the Western Wall. "This city is so beautiful, historic and religious. We are very happy to visit this religious place as Buddhists. This is my seventh visit. Every time I come here, I find something new."

On Sept. 10, Agon Shu made history by holding a Fire Rites ceremony, or Dai Saito Gomaku, with the aim of praying for world peace, on a promenade overlooking Jerusalem's old city.

The ceremony was a scaled-down version of the ceremony by Agon Shu in Kyoto each year. Instead of two "goma-dan" pyres, there was one, and the flower-bedecked altar was smaller than the one in Kyoto. The sense of excitement always present at Agon Shu ceremonies was heightened by the exotic backdrop of Jerusalem, looking like a giant movie set on which some of history's greatest dramas have unfolded.

To the accompaniment of an orchestral fanfare, the main contingent of Agon Shu followers, dressed as yamabushi and blowing conch shells, entered the roped-off site where the ceremony was to be held, with Kiriyama in the lead.

As the Agon Shu members filed into the enclosure, Kiriyama took his place on the "Shishi-za," or Lion Seat, which refers to the fact that, just as the lion is the king of beasts, the Buddha reigns supreme in the world of humans. Therefore, wherever the Buddha happened to sit to give teachings, that place was called the "Lion Seat."

From here Kiriyama prayed to the Lord Buddha on behalf of those taking part in the ceremony and the souls of the dead for whom prayers have been offered.

Israeli dignitaries present at the ceremony included Tourism Minister Ruhama Avraham, Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Yigal Amedi and David Lau, chief rabbi of the Israeli city of Modifin.

"I attended the unveiling ceremony of the statue of the Lion of Judah, the symbol of Jerusalem, and also attended a Fire Rites ceremony memorial service in Hiroshima," said Lau of his trip to Japan this past February. "It was really significant for us. During the memorial service, I thought Jewish and Japanese people have much in common. Both of them experienced great suffering. We are very



Spiritual kinship: Agon Shu members dressed as "yamabushi (mountain priests)" throw "gomagi" votive wooden tablets into the flames during the Sept. 10 Fire Rites ceremony in Jerusalem; (right) the Rev. Seiryu Kiriyama addresses the crowd prior to the ceremony.



grateful to the Rev. Kiriyama."

'Peace is our common goal'

"Peace is our common goal," Lau added. "We will continue working together for peace in the world."

In a speech preceding the lighting of the goma-dan, Kiriyama expressed his gratitude to the people and government of Israel for allowing Agon Shu to hold the Fire Rites ceremony in Jerusalem.

"I really appreciate your heartwarming support," Kiriyama said. "I hope our friendship and respect will last forever. I think Israel is a very peaceful nation. I hope our friendship with the people of Israel will last forever."

Following the speeches, the hauntingly beautiful sound of "gagaku (ancient Japanese court music)" filled the air, and four Japanese women wearing long, flowing light-green silk robes took their positions between the beautifully bedecked altar and the goma-dan. They began a slow and stately "bugaku" dance, which like gagaku was once performed exclusively at the ancient Imperial Japanese court.

Next, two priestesses performed the ceremony, a Shinto purification ritual known as "shinrei" and its slow, deliberate pace set the tone for the entire ceremony.

Each of the Shinto maidens held an object called a "hokosaki-rei," which comprises a short sword on whose cross-guard are mounted small spherical golden bells, which glistened in the bright sunlight along with the bright, polished steel of the blade. Next on the program was the ritual known as "goshin-bo," or "rites of protection," in which the practitioner becomes one with the mind of the Buddha to protect mind and body from harm and earthly desires.

That was followed by the "ono-saho," in which a ceremonially clad member of the Agon Shu faithful wielded an ornamental ax in the four cardinal directions and the center to symbolically cut away earthly attachments. Then came the "hokyu-saho" ceremony, in which an archer shoots arrows in the four cardinal directions, the center and the northeast (the direction considered the "demon gate") and the "hoken-saho," in which an Agon Shu member brandishes a sword to drive away evil spirits and purify the space.

Two long torches were then lit and attendants carefully used them in turn to ignite the goma-dan pyre. Soon a column

of thick whitish-gray smoke started rising into the bright blue Middle Eastern sky. After a couple of minutes the smoke gave way to leaping tongues of orange flame that stood out vividly against the blue vault of the sky.

As the bonfire blazed away on the pyre, the Agon Shu faithful chanted sutras to the steady beat of "taiko" drums. Meanwhile, the first of 8.5 million "gomagi" votive wooden tablets, on which believers had inscribed their names and prayers, were thrown into the flames.

'Unique event'

"This is a unique event," said Aviv Jasmen, an Israeli without any prior knowledge of Agon Shu who attended the ceremony. "I asked for peace in this area — we need some peace in this area, to calm down everyone, to make it paradise."

At a reception held on the evening of Sept. 10 at the Mount Zion Hotel, Kiriyama expressed his thanks to the people and government of Israel.

"At first, I thought it was impossible to have a Fire Rites ceremony in Israel because I didn't know Israel well, and in Japan, Israel is thought to be full of danger," he said.

"But when I came here for the preparation of the memorial service, I received a warm welcome and support... But actually, there was no danger at all, and I could make preparations for the service very smoothly and comfortably."

"In fact, I had a warm welcome and held the Fire Rites ceremony without trouble. We could successfully hold the Fire Rites ceremony and we wish to thank you very much for your support."

The message of peace was reiterated in a speech by Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupolianski. "The Rev. Kiriyama and members of Agon Shu visited us to pray for world peace," Lupolianski said. "We are praying for world peace together with you. What for we wish is not temporary peace between wars but everlasting peace."

"We will never forget the Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara who helped many Jewish people escape the Holocaust," Lupolianski said. "Members of Agon Shu, your visit to Israel made our hearts warm. We have a long history, but we are a minority," he added. "So we need friends like you, Agon Shu members. We thank you for your support from the bottom of our hearts, and we hope to have more and more friends like you."



Lest we forget: The Rev. Seiryu Kiriyama lays a wreath on a stone slab covering Holocaust victims' ashes in the Hall of Remembrance at Yad Vashem, the memorial to the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators.



Universal message: The Rev. Seiryu Kiriyama and other Agon Shu members look on as flames leap up from the "goma-dan" pyre during the Fire Rites ceremony Sept. 10 on a promenade overlooking Jerusalem's old city. The purpose of the historic ceremony was to pray for world peace.

remnant of the Holy Temple. The wall has become a place of pilgrimage for Jews as it is the closest permitted accessible site to the holiest spot in Judaism, the "Even ha-shetiyah," or Foundation Stone, which lies on the Temple Mount.

And when Agon Shu held its Fire Rites Festival, or Hoshi Matsuri, in Kyoto on Feb. 11 this year, a delegation of prominent Israeli religious and government figures was on hand to see the festival for themselves.

Thus the groundwork was laid for a full-fledged Fire Rites ceremony in Israel, which went ahead without a hitch and made a very favorable impression on all those who attended.

"I'm very impressed," said Shiri Ksantini-Mor, a Tel Aviv resident who attended the Fire Rites ceremony Sept. 10. "We visited Japan a few weeks ago and it's very exciting to meet the Japanese again, and to see how they do everything so perfectly and with so much deep feeling. I'm very excited that they chose to come to Israel and that they are really interested in us. I hope they can help to bring peace to us. It's a very difficult situation here, one of the most difficult in the world."

Her husband, Moshe Mor, expressed similar sentiments: "Like everything the Japanese do, they go all the way and they go deep. I really enjoyed this. I feel it's very deep and they really believe in their faith."

As to just what that faith is, perhaps a few words of explanation are in order.

Spiritual aid

Agon Shu is a Buddhist organization and while the Fire Rites originate with Buddhism and shugendo (an ancient mountain religion native to Japan), since 1993 they have been conducted as a syncretic amalgam of Buddhist and Shinto ritual. The organization's purpose is to provide spiritual aid and comfort to the souls of the departed, and to help the living advance on the path to self-realization

draws on the best elements from Mahayana, Theravada and esoteric (including Tibetan) Buddhism, as well as incorporating elements from other spiritual traditions such as Japan's indigenous Shinto and shugendo religions, and Taoism from China.

Higher international profile

Under Kiriyama's leadership, Agon Shu in recent years has achieved an ever-higher international profile thanks to a series of Fire Rites ceremonies it has held in various locations around the world, including New York (2000, 2001), Paris (2003), Oswiecim/Auschwitz in Poland (2006) and Khabarovsk in Siberia (2007).

The activities of Kiriyama and the Agon Shu in Israel encompassed more than the Fire Rites ceremony. On Sept. 8, Kiriyama and several Agon Shu officials visited Yad Vashem, the Jewish people's memorial to the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II.

Located on Har Hazikaron, the Mount of Remembrance, overlooking Jerusalem, Yad Vashem comprises museums, exhibits, archives, monuments, sculptures and memorials. The beauty of the trees and gardens among which the complex's various facilities are located is offset by the sense of horror one feels when contemplating the enormity of the crimes Yad Vashem bears witness to.

Kiriyama was visibly moved as he toured Yad Vashem's centerpiece, the new 4,200-sq.-meter Holocaust History Museum. The museum's basic concept is to present the story of the "Shoah" (as the Holocaust is known in Hebrew) "from a unique Jewish perspective, emphasizing the experiences of the individual victims through original artifacts, survivor testimonies and personal possessions."

The museum's very effectively presented and informative exhibits bring the awful story of the Holocaust to life in a way that no textbook can. Here is a dis-